

Candidates owe us their views on the drug war

by Robert_J_Caldwell

America's global struggle against international drug smuggling rates hardly a mention by the presidential candidates of both major political parties. Given that these narco-traffickers flood America's streets with an estimated \$23 billion a year in destructive drugs, that's a deeply worrying omission.

National security is a top priority when it comes to countering international terrorism. Where's the recognition that billions of dollars in illicit narcotics that ravage the lives of 7 million seriously addicted Americans, threaten 20 million other narcotics users and vastly inflate crime rates are threats to national security, too? In fact and effect, the international drug trade amounts to a direct attack on the national security of the United States and scores of other nations, among them key U.S. allies in Latin America, Asia and Europe.

For Americans, the front line in this struggle is now Mexico, home to five major drug-trafficking cartels that together supply the bulk of cocaine, marijuana, heroin and methamphetamine entering the United States. Defeating these rapacious criminal syndicates and stemming the flood of their narcotics ought to be a national security and public health/public safety priority. Yet, the desperate fight against this massively destructive invasion isn't registering with the political elites, witness the silence on this issue from all the leading presidential contenders.

In part, the lack of focus on narcotics smuggling no doubt reflects the widespread public perception that the drug war is a near-hopeless endeavor, a latter-day version of America's failed Prohibition experiment against alcohol.

John Walters, director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, begs to differ with this no-progress assumption. On a visit last week to San Diego to announce an intensified counter-narcotics strategy on the border, and in an interview with the Union-Tribune's editorial board, Walters offered a slew of statistics to buttress his case for gains in the drug war.

Walters argued, persuasively, that equating counter-narcotics efforts with Prohibition is a false analogy. Alcohol consumption, in moderation, is socially acceptable. The attempt to ban it was doomed from the start by pervasive public attitudes, although it's also true that Prohibition vastly reduced alcohol consumption. The addiction-breeding use of cocaine, methamphetamine and heroin is not socially acceptable, nor should it ever be. As for marijuana, abundant data show that it is a so-called gateway narcotic, especially for young people, that promotes the subsequent use of more dangerous drugs. Moreover, today's marijuana product is far more potent than the varieties prevalent a generation ago.

The myth that the drug war is a perennial loser is equally pernicious, as Walters noted. Among his current statistical evidence: Cocaine prices are rising sharply in 37 American cities, reflecting disruptions in

supply; workforce drug testing shows a steady decline in marijuana use; Mexico's government is now eradicating more than half of all marijuana grown annually there for the U.S. market and is all-but-banning the importation of precursor chemicals used in large-scale production of methamphetamines.

Walters rightly cites Mexico's dramatically escalated efforts against drug trafficking as vital to progress in U.S. efforts to curb this binational and international scourge. Since taking office last December, Mexican President Felipe Calderon has deployed Mexico's army and counter-narcotics police units to nine Mexican states heavily involved in drug trafficking and drug production. Arrests of Mexican traffickers plus eradication of marijuana and opium crops in Mexico are all up substantially. Calderon's government is also extraditing Mexican drug traffickers under indictment in the United States for trial here, an essential step in defeating the cartels.

Walters notes, as well, that the Bush administration and Calderon's government are close to agreement on a major U.S. aid package totaling nearly \$1 billion in counter-narcotics assistance to Mexico.

All this belies the notion that little or nothing can be done to combat drug trafficking. So, too, do the historical examples of Turkey, Southeast Asia and Colombia.

Forty years ago, Turkey and Southeast Asia's notorious "golden triangle" were global centers of opium and heroin production. Efforts led by the U.S. largely eliminated opium production in Turkey and tamed the drug trade emanating from northern Thailand. American assistance helped Colombia, on the brink of becoming a narco-state only a decade ago, crush the monstrous Medellin cartel, disrupt the Cali syndicates, and effectively attack drug-dealing insurgents and paramilitaries.

The American public should want to know what those who would be president think of all this.

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