Illicit Plants

Threatening sovereignty at home and abroad

By Neil T. Proto

"SOVEREIGNTY," Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "is a question of power and pure fact."

The real test of sovereignty is not whether a legislature can enact law or a judiciary can interpret it, but whether the executive can, in fact, enforce the law within the confines of the nation.

We are witnessing in the United States a rare phenomenon in our history: a serious, methodical threat to the ability of government to exercise its sovereignty. The base of the threat is clear. Illicit plants – opium poppies, coca leaves, and marijuana – have come to the US with a geographic pervasiveness and severe violence that raise fundamental questions about the ability of state and federal law enforcement.

Sovereignty is in jeopardy in Colombia today, as it was in Mexico in the 1970s.

The source of the threat today is the Medellín region of Colombia. But such a threat is not new: It was Mexico in the 1970s and Bolivia earlier this decade.

US's foreign policy for dealing with it remains disjointed. It has no agreed-upon conceptual framework or guiding principles. We formulate our approach to illicit plants as we do our foreign aid: nation by nation. We view those responsible for formulating international drug policy as engaged in fighting crime, rather than conducting diplomacy.

Congress created the office of assistant secretary of state for international narcotics matters in 1978. But in the war on drugs, the US still lacks a lucid foreign policy.

In the '70s, the western rim of Mexico, from Oaxaca to Sonora, through the Sierra Madre Occidental and bounded by the Gulf of California, had become a conduit for illegal traffic in two directions: guns into Mexico and South America, illicit plants into the US.

By 1975, the corruption of government officials in the rim's isolated villages and the city of Culiacán was no longer subtle. The killing in the Sinaloa region had grown wanton and vicious. Campesinos were growing and using illicit plants.

Most troublesome, campesinos were being organized around a new set of economic and cultural values. International trade routes had been established and the authority of those living off the profits of illicit plants had taken hold.

The Mexican government assigned 10,000 army troops to the Sierra Madre to interdict drug traffic and to inhibit planting with herbicide spraying. The US Drug Enforcement Administration provided sophisticated weather and detection equipment, and planes and helicopters were supplied by the US.

At stake for the Mexican government was whether it could regain control of a significant portion of its country. The war in Mexico was about sovereignty.

Unfortunately, despite the US aid, many American officials missed the lesson of Mexico: When sporadic criminal activity turns into methodical, pervasive violence that threatens the fundamental authority to enforce law, the sovereignty of the nation is at stake.

When that line is crossed more than just crime is involved. Sitting in Medellín, a politically secure drug dealer views the US's southern border – from southern California to northern Florida – as an immense, multi-lane thoroughfare for commerce with Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles.

Effective distribution of drugs requires strategic thinking and a knowledge of world geography, intelligence networks, and foreign affairs. It also intersects with a range of human values – greed, power, family life, and violence – that raises political questions about the motivation of those involved and the capacity of the state to conduct internal and external relations.

The Drug traffickers are no longer mere criminals. Indigenous political movements in Bolivia and Peru have financed their activities with illicit-plant proceeds.

The Cuban government has supported drug commerce. The Panamanian government's internal oppression is sustained by it. And there is evidence that Colombia's illicit-plant lords have hired mercenaries to further undermine the legitimate government.

In 1981, Sen. Sam Nunn stated that "international drug trafficking . . .]is] as real a threat to our national security as the threats we face abroad from hostile powers. Until America faces]this problem], the poor . . . and many of our older citizens will live in fear and despair, unable to escape the high crime areas. Wealthy and middle-income Americans . . . will become increasingly isolated. . . ." Such fear and isolation have started to capture America.

The "pure fact" of sovereignty is in jeopardy in Colombia today, as it was in Mexico in the 1970s. Under such circumstances, the range of responses narrows considerably and the ultimate objective of government is as indivisible as sovereignty must be: All nations, including our own, must be assured that within their geographic borders the exercise of sovereign authority is nowhere held in suspense.

Our foreign policy must recognize that the threat to sovereignty abroad caused by illicit plants poses an insidious threat to sovereignty here at home.

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