

Supporting the Drug War Supports Terrorists

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In recent months, the United States government spent \$10 million of our tax dollars for its latest antidrug campaign. Its new pitch: if you buy illegal drugs, you're supporting terrorists because terrorists are intimately involved in the production, sale, and distribution of drugs. Guess what? I agree. People who buy illegal drugs do support terrorists. But here's what the government leaves out: by making drugs illegal, the government is supporting terrorists even more.

Have you ever wondered why terrorist groups get involved in the illegal drug market and not, for example, in the legal market for Coca-Cola, soap, or envelopes? The inaccurate answer that many people give is that the profits in dealing drugs are incredibly high, which attracts criminals. But profits are not incredibly high, once you adjust for risk: people in that trade have a nasty tendency to die or go to prison, and they insist on being compensated for that risk. Besides, if high profits were what attracted criminals, why don't those same high profits attract normal investors?

No. The reason terrorists get involved in illegal drugs is that they are criminals; once a market is made illegal, the high risk-adjusted prices of the illegal good reward those with "criminal skills." One such skill is the ability and willingness to murder people. That's why organized crime took over the liquor industry during prohibition—and quickly exited when prohibition ended.

Moreover, the United States government is effectively supporting left-wing terrorists in Colombia. How so? Say you're a Colombian coca producer trying to make a peso. Working against you are Colombia's military and police, pressured by U.S. government subsidies and threats and aided by U.S. military personnel and equipment. The first thing you want is protection, and the place to go for protection is to antigovernment people with guns who know how to fight. Two such groups are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), both revolutionary leftists. You don't have to be a left-wing ideologue yourself to decide to pay them protection money, which is just what many coca farmers and cocaine producers do.

By one estimate, the revenue to FARC from drug-related sources is more than \$600 million a year, which would make it the best-funded terrorist group in the world. Thus, the war against drugs actually strengthens the position of the leftist insurgents.

These insurgents have terrorized Colombian society. Between 1981 and 1986, for example, drug traffickers murdered more than fifty Colombian judges, including twelve supreme court justices. Colombian citizens are also terrorized: more than one million of them emigrated in the past five years. If a similar percent of Americans did the same, we would lose fourteen million citizens—almost half California's population.

A more informative ad line from the U.S. government would be: "When you support the drug war, you're supporting terrorists."