

The politics of the paraquat program

There is a political battle raging in the United States. The issue is drug eradication or decriminalization, and how it is resolved will have international repercussions.

The current fight is over herbicides like paraquat which were used successfully to eliminate the marijuana crop in Mexico (see below). The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML)—the drug lobby in the United States—has and continues to raise a hue and cry against their use. NORML claims concerns of health, human rights and environment as reasons to stop the program.

NORML's claims notwithstanding, paraquat and other herbicides have proven to be the most effective agent against drugs. Mexico's use of herbicides ended that country's role as a major exporter of marijuana and heroin. The same could be true for Colombia, now the main supplier of marijuana to the U.S. What NORML in fact complains about is that herbicide use will eliminate drugs from the street.

Closely coordinating with NORML on behalf of the \$200 billion a year illegal drug business are Senators Jacob Javits (on the NORML board), Charles Percy, and Edward Kennedy. Percy, in 1978, sponsored an amendment to the Foreign Military Assistance bill stating that no military aid could be used for drug eradication programs using herbicide spraying. A NORML representative has recently stated that they are indebted to Percy for the progress decriminalization has already made.

Undeclared presidential candidate Edward Kennedy is now backing a criminal reform bill that would, among other things, decriminalize marijuana on a federal level. (Decriminalization is merely an expediency; international treaty agreements forbid legalization.)

Even before Percy introduced his amendment, NORML was in court contesting the U.S. State Department's spraying program. Using information contained in a March 1978 special report issued by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (see below) that argued for marijuana's harmlessness and the dangers of paraquat, NORML argued that marijuana should be legalized and paraquat spraying banned. An out-of-court settlement stipulated that the State Department had to do an environmental impact statement on the Mexico program and other future programs. Until NORML was satisfied with the results of the report, all paraquat spraying programs would stop except for the Mexico program. Said one State Department official:

the paraquat issue "is just too hot to handle politically."

Then in July, Percy's amendment was passed unanimously, but with a rider stating that spraying programs could continue if the herbicide contained a "warning" agent.

Percy's amendment gives the Health, Education and Welfare Secretary the final say on the herbicide program. Using the NIPA reports, Joseph Califano stated before resigning that all financing for the Mexico paraquat program should be stopped. He advised marijuana smokers to use water pipes or bake marijuana brownies to avoid paraquat contamination.

At this point, the State Department was on the line to end the program.

Applying additional pressure, Congressman Benjamin Rosenthal of New York, an advocate of marijuana decriminalization, called for increasing U.S. drug aid to Colombia from \$3 million to \$16 million. Such generosity did not come without provisos: the money was earmarked for interdiction and not aerial herbicide spraying.

Third World condemns easing of dope laws

Following are excerpts from an article printed in the Sept. 22 issue of the Swedish daily Svenska Dagbladet, reporting on discussion which took place at a recent meeting of the United Nations International Drug Agency in Geneva, Switzerland.

The biggest Asian drug producers, the products of whose countries are flooding the black market in Europe and the U.S.A. have warned the Western countries (they will) work against attempts to decriminalize drugs. According to well-informed sources, the warning was given at a conference recently held behind locked doors at the United Nations International Drug Agency in Geneva...

The (results of) present developments in Western Europe and the U.S.A. toward legalizing cannabis is "to actively encourage and increase the illegal production as well as smuggling and other crimes in

But opposition began to emerge within Congress. For almost a year, local community groups and organizations, some of which have formed antidrug coalitions, have demanded an end to the illegal drug trade and a more extensive application of the herbicide program. On Sept. 29, representatives of these groups will be meeting in Detroit, Mich. to form a National Anti-Drug Coalition. Through lobbying efforts, legislative proposals and legal actions, these antidrug organizations have made their voice heard.

On Sept. 11, New York Congressman Lester Wolfe called for the "revision" of the Percy amendment. At Senate Criminal Justice Subcommittee hearings, Wolfe questioned the "supporting data regarding the health effects" of paraquat-sprayed marijuana which he called "incomplete and misleading."

Wolfe has called on Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Patricia Harris to "reevaluate" the scientific evidence in light of a recent study done by a group of i Abuse has sent a letter to Secretary Harris also calling on her to reevaluate the evidence.

NORML did not give in. The State Department and the herbicide spraying program are in the throes of yet another lawsuit filed by NORML. NORML charges that the State Department, Cyrus Vance, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Agency for International Development have failed to implement Section Four of the International Security Assistance Act of 1978—the

Percy amendment. The suit bases its argument on the National Environmental Protection Act. Thus, if the State Department goes to court and loses, the U.S. government would be put under NEPA constraints for any future foreign aid policy decisions, not just in the area of drug eradication. State will probably go for another out of court settlement, agreeing to implement the Percy amendment.

What would be the environmental impact on Harlem (frequented by that ill-fated nephew of Sen. Kennedy) or any other drug-infested community if marijuana and heroin were eradicated? NORML explains in their lawsuit:

"... There may also be serious health dangers to the American heroin user from herbicide-contaminated heroin. Little research has been conducted to determine whether heroin contaminated with 2-4D is entering this country and what impact this could have on heroin users in the United States. There have been a number of instances when paraquat has been sprayed on poppy fields in Mexico. This may create an even greater danger to the heroin user. No tests have been conducted to determine whether heroin contaminated with paraquat is entering the country, and what impact this could have on the heroin user.

"The spraying program also has significant social and economic impact upon Mexico and the

connection to the drug trade in other parts of the world." This is asserted in a common statement by the national drug police agencies in the Far East.

The latest example of attempts to legalize cannabis comes from British Young Conservatives, the youth group of the present British government. They plan to introduce this issue at the annual party congress of the Conservatives in October...

Measures in the West toward decimalization of cannabis have created a large semilegal cannabis market, and the big economic profits in the market have attracted criminal suppliers who are trading with several kinds of drugs, among them heroin...

The new liberal view of cannabis shared by many Western governments is based on scientific evidence, or rather the absence of scientific evidence. "There is no evidence that continuous use of cannabis has any damaging effects on your health," it is asserted in a medical report from Great Britain...

The political pressure has increased in many Western European countries against following the line of the White House in Washington. There, the

principle has been accepted that possession of cannabis is not illegal, while not yet wholly legalized... In its statement, the Far East drug police asked the special United Nations organizations to "ask all governments to continue their actions and not to encourage cultivation, use or trade of cannabis."

They noted that many countries still view cannabis consumption as "a serious crime with social and economic risks," and that some of them, contrary to the West, have recently increased the penalties. They regretted that the changed policy of the rich countries is encouraging the illegal drug traffic and is only increasing the work of the drug police in the rest of the world...

The background of the sharpened posture of the developing countries against legalizing drugs such as cannabis is the fact that they do not have the drug-fighting apparatus that is needed to fight the rise of the black market. This causes growing corruption and increases the use of violence in other areas of society, not necessarily directly connected to the drug traffic.

United States. In many remote areas of Mexico, marijuana and poppies are the sole cash crops for the population, and the spraying program endangers the social and economic existence of these populations.

Many Mexicans whose sole source of income has been destroyed by the spraying program leave their rural homes for the larger cities of Mexico or become illegal aliens in the United States.

"The spraying program has also reduced the supply of heroin entering the United States from Mexico. This has caused the price of heroin sold in the United States to increase, and the purity of heroin sold 'on the street' to decrease from about 6.5 percent in 1976 to below 5.0 percent in 1978, Environmental Impact Statement (April 1979) ... The increased price and decreased purity of heroin sold in the United States has resulted in increased robberies and other criminal acts committed by heroin addicts to support their habits.

"The addition of paraquat to marijuana con-

sumed in the United States constitutes Cruel and Unusual Punishment, in violation of the Eight Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The severity of the health risk for paraquat bears no relationship to the seriousness of the offense of smoking marijuana, the program violates 'evolving standards of decency,' and it punishes the 'status' of being a marijuana user."

As NORML makes all too clear, there is little if any interest in the mental or physical health of the American population. The politics of paraquat hits squarely on the political economy of drugs. Eliminate drugs in Mexico, Colombia and elsewhere and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are stripped of a source of cash from their Third World debtors. Eliminate drugs, and the \$200 million a year illegal drug business goes into bankruptcy, going a long way toward restoring America to its place as the world's industrial leader.

—Martha Zoller

Mexico's war on drugs

In 1972, Mexico superseded Turkey as the main supplier of heroin and marijuana to addicts in the United States, supplying, by 1974, 89 percent of the demand for heroin and 75 percent of the demand for marijuana. Today, as the current deputy director of the Mexico Drug Control program has assessed it, "there is less Mexican heroin in the U.S. and ... its purity is down to about 4 percent from 40-50 percent three years ago." In addition, Mexico is no longer a marijuana exporter.

That startling reversal is the result of a two-phase drug eradication program launched in 1974 by Mexico's President Luis Echeverria, with U.S. assistance.

Mexico's war on drugs, termed Operation Trize, first mapped out the targeted zones. Using ultra-modern detection equipment, perfected during the 1960s, photographic studies of the zones were made, detecting the location and size of the marijuana and poppy fields. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency began to train the Mexican Federal Judicial Police and antinarcotics personnel to be able to continue directing the drug eradication program once U.S. advisory assistance was no longer necessary.

These areas were then put under military control,

road blocks were set up, and the lands of the latifundist drug cultivators were expropriated. The poppy and marijuana fields were sprayed with 2-4D and paraquat, respectively. Paraquat was recommended and chose by the Drug Enforcement Agency as one of the few herbicides proven to have no harmful effects on personnel using it or on the soil.

Phase one lasted four months and netted the destruction of 14,000 acres of poppies.

Phase two began on May 10, 1975 with the launching of a 25-day reconnaissance by mission using U.S. aircraft flown by DEA pilots and crews, accompanied by Mexican Judicial Police spotters. An additional 9,000 square miles were brought under surveillance.

Operation Trize then moved in with herbicides to destroy, in 1976, 14,705 acres of marijuana fields and 32,284 acres of poppy fields; in 1977, 23,449 acres of marijuana and 45,90 acres of poppy; and in 1978, 9,794 acres of marijuana and 20,725 of poppy.

This is the sort of drug eradication program which the Anti-Drug Coalitions in the United States and Colombia have recommended for implementation in Colombia, a major source of drugs to the U.S. today. This is also the program against which NORML and their friends have initiated legal action.