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THE WAR ON DRUGS – AMERICA’S OTHER WAR

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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23 April 2008

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Abstract

The United States Coast Guard, with the assistance of the United States Navy, has been engaged in interdicting drugs in the maritime environment since Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs thirty-seven years ago. Despite significant progress in interdiction efforts, producers and distributors have not been deterred from using the maritime environment to ship cocaine to the United States. This paper was written to analyze the operational factors of time, space and force in order to determine the most effective way to utilize the limited resources available for maritime drug interdiction. From the analysis, the paper draws conclusions concerning current drug interdictions efforts. Finally, the paper gives recommendations to assign more resources and improve current drug interdiction efforts.

Background

The Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime drug interdiction and works with the Department of Justice (DoJ), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Defense (DoD), and a host of other agencies to accomplish its mission. As the lead maritime agency, the Coast Guard coordinates joint assets to detect, deter, disrupt and seize illegal drugs. The Department of Defense is tasked with tracking drug traffickers, but not with interdiction or law enforcement due to Posse Comitatus.¹ As such, the Navy supports the Coast Guard by providing assets to detect and localize drug traffickers. Navy assets work with Coast Guard law enforcement detachments to counter illicit trafficking operations by sharing intelligence and providing sensors for detection, monitoring, and hand off of suspected traffickers. Navy ship's may also conduct bridge-to-bridge queries and transport traffickers who have been apprehended by law enforcement officials. The Navy's efforts are coordinated through Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South), a single purpose National Task Force established under the authority of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) through the National Interdiction Command and Control Plan (NICCP). The agency is composed of representatives from civilian, foreign, and military agencies.² JIATF-South is a subordinate of U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), but only for fiscal and administrative control.

¹ Jason M. Bunch, *United States Military Law Enforcement Use and Narcotics Interdiction: A Test of the Posse Comitatus Law* (Vermillion, SD: University of South Dakota, 1995), 135.

² Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Transit Zone Interdiction Operations", <http://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/786/52968> (accessed 24 March 2008)

Introduction

Since Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs thirty-seven years ago, the United States Coast Guard and the United States Navy have continued to make steady progress toward interdicting cocaine shipments bound for the United States through maritime trafficking channels.³ Yet, even with record amounts of cocaine seized annually, our forces have not deterred producers and distributors from getting their product to market. The War on Drugs can also be tied to the Global War on Terror (GWOT) since the money generated from drugs is known to benefit international terrorist groups who have operatives in Latin American countries. In the “tri-border” region, an area located at the intersection of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, there are known operatives from Hizbollah, Hamas and according to some reports, Al-Queda.⁴ In this mutually beneficial arrangement, terrorist groups gain a source of revenue and expertise in the illicit transfer and laundering of money for their operations in trade for weapons and military style training to drug trafficking organizations.⁵ More importantly, this narco-terrorist linkage poses a serious threat to the stability of Latin America, and potentially could threaten the security of the United States.⁶ United States Southern Command’s Commander, Admiral James Stravridis, said in his 2008 Posture Statement, “We consider Latin America and the Caribbean to be potential bases for future terrorist threats to the United States and others in the Americas, The conditions in parts of the region -- easily skirted borders, black market economies, corruption, poverty, established illicit trafficking routes -- all could provide maneuvering room for any form of terrorism to

³ Steven Duke and Albert Gross, *America’s Longest War: Rethinking our Tragic Crusade Against Drugs*. (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons. 1993), xvi

⁴ Robert Spencer, “Terror’s South American Front”, *Jihad Watch*, 19 March 2004, <http://jihadwatch.org/archives/001217.php> (accessed 21 April 2008)

⁵ Robert Jacobson, *Illegal Drugs America’s Anguish* (New York, NY: Thomson Gale, Thomson Corporation, 2006), 79

⁶ Ibid. p. 99

exploit, to include Islamic radical groups."⁷ Given this threat to regional security, the United States needs to give more emphasis to the War on Drugs. The center of gravity for drug cartels and terrorist organizations is arguably their source of income. The drug cartels are flexible and adapt quickly to U.S. interdiction efforts. The United States needs to continually examine the operational factors of force, time, and space to ensure its forces are employed in the most effective and efficient manner. This paper will begin by examining the United States' National Drug Control Policy, focusing on the domestic effort, international challenges, and how the Coast Guard and Navy are contributing to the President's goals. The paper will then explore why the War on Drugs is a difficult challenge by looking at each of the operational factors of time, space, and force and how they relate to this war. Lastly, the paper will offer recommendations on how the United States could be a more effective force in maritime drug trafficking interdiction.

The United States National Drug Control Strategy

The United States National Drug Control Strategy is a three-pronged approach aimed at reducing drug use by 10 percent over the next two years, and 25 percent over the next five years.⁸ The program is based on stopping drug use before it starts, providing treatment to those who are already using drugs and lastly disrupting the drug market.

Domestically, the U.S. employs a robust anti-drug campaign aimed at youth of all ages to stop the use of drugs before it starts. The effectiveness of the program is a point of debate but, according to Mr. John P. Walters, Director of National Drug Control Policy, "Teens are getting the message about the harms of drugs and are changing their behavior –

⁷ House and Senate Armed Services Committee, *The Posture Statement of Admiral James G. Stavridis, United States Navy Commander, United States Southern Command*, 110th Cong., 2008.

⁸ Robert Jacobson, *Illegal Drugs America's Anguish* (New York, NY: Thomson Gale, Thomson Corporation, 2006), 79

for the better.” Supporting his opinion are the findings from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) who conducts the largest and most comprehensive study of drugs in the United States. According to their findings released September 6, 2007, overall illicit drug use among teens ages 12-17 is at a five year low.⁹ President Bush sums up the effect of the United States’ efforts,

Because Americans took action, today there are an estimated 860,000 fewer children using drugs than 6 years ago. Because Americans took action, because grassroots activists stood up and said ‘We’ve had enough,’ because law enforcement worked hard—communities are safer, families are stronger

In the United States, the population may debate the effectiveness and the ways and means of reducing drug use, but most Americans would agree there has to be some sort of control aimed at eliminating drug use and the introduction of drugs to American society. The challenge the President faces is getting all of the Latin American countries to support U.S. measures.

The War on Drugs faces opposition from governments who do not support U.S. efforts to eradicate drugs. Bolivian President Evo Morales is resisting pressure from the Bush government to eradicate coca bushes.¹⁰ Morales does not support drugs in his country and, in fact, has a strong anti-cocaine stance, but he chooses to let farmers voluntarily destroy coca bushes rather than conform to U.S. eradication policy. It’s his opinion that by allowing farmers to voluntarily comply, he is preserving their human rights and not allowing foreigners to dictate Bolivia’s policies.¹¹ Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has placed

⁹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *New National survey Reveals Drug Use Down Among Adolescents in U.S.-Successes in Substance Abuse Recovery Highlighted*, Press Release. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov>

¹⁰ Hugh O’Shaughnessy, “Why the U.S. is Loosing its War on Cocaine”, *The Independent*, 27 May 2007, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article2586645.ece> (accessed 24 September 2007)

¹¹ Hugh O’Shaughnessy, “Why the U.S. is Loosing its War on Cocaine”, *The Independent*, 27 May 2007, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article2586645.ece> (accessed 24 September 2007)

strict control on his country's cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).¹²

Venezuela does not allow the DEA to mount any anti-drug operations in its territory nor does it allow any over-flights by U.S. Government aircraft. Chavez has taken the stance that 85 percent of the drugs produced in Latin America go straight to the U.S. and, as such, the U.S. should spend more money controlling its own borders vice attempting to gain influence in his country.¹³ Lastly, Ecuador has announced they will ignore U.S. instructions in the War on Drugs and has also denied the U.S. access to the Pacific port of Manta which the military uses to monitor cocaine shipments between Peru and Colombia.¹⁴ In South America, spraying herbicides on the coca bushes to kill them has shown the greatest effect on reducing production; however, even this technique is now under criticism as ineffective. A White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) survey based on satellite imagery found that coca fields had increased in area by 8%, now consuming 385,484 acres, an area roughly the size of New York City.¹⁵ Spraying the coca bushes has also been criticized by the UN's special reporter on health. He stated, "there is reliable evidence that the aerial spraying of glyphosate along the Colombia-Ecuador border is damaging to the health of people living in Ecuador."

The Department of Defense's primary efforts are involved in working with other agencies to disrupt the market by interdicting the supply of drugs. Last year, an estimated

¹² Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Why the U.S. is Loosing its War on Cocaine", *The Independent*, 27 May 2007, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article2586645.ece> (accessed 24 September 2007)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Why the U.S. is Loosing its War on Cocaine", *The Independent*, 27 May 2007, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article2586645.ece> (accessed 24 September 2007)

¹⁵ Goodma, J. 2007, 'Colombian Coca Output Up For 3rd Straight Year', Common Sense for Drug Policy, Retrieved 25 September 2007 from http://www.csdp.org/news/news/ap_colombia_060307.htm

912 metric tons of cocaine was shipped to the U.S.¹⁶ Depending on which source cited, law enforcement agencies, including DoD, seized about 20 to 40 percent of cocaine destined for the U.S. before it reached its shores. To put this in perspective, it is estimated that agencies would need to seize up to 80 percent to make the production unprofitable for producers.¹⁷ Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru, the main producers of cocaine, have the capacity to produce 900 metric tons a year, and that figure is also on the rise.¹⁸ Colombia has received an estimated \$4.5 billion under Plan Colombia from Washington for drug control, more U.S. aid than any other country with the exception of Egypt and Israel. However, Colombia's production has actually increased and it has been an open secret for years that many senior politicians and members of the armed forces are corrupt.¹⁹ Not all of the United States investment of an estimated \$25 billion over the past thirty-six years to programs aimed at reducing or eliminating the production of drugs in South America has been ineffective. There has been some measurable progress:²⁰ The street price of a gram of cocaine is on the rise as a result of interdiction efforts, and from January through June 2007, the average price per pure gram of all domestic cocaine purchases increased 24%, to \$118.70.²¹

Depending on which source one reads one could come to one's own conclusion as to the effectiveness of the War on Drugs. A commonly accepted measure of effectiveness (MOE) is focused on the amount of cocaine produced and sent to the United States. If we

¹⁶ Jim Landers, "It's a Recession – in the Illegal Drugs Market", *The Dallas Morning News*, 18 March 2008, <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/bus/columnists/jlanders/stories/DN-landers> (accessed 26 March 2008).

¹⁷ Misha Glenny, "The Lost War", *Washingtonpost.com*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/17ar2007081701716_p.html (accessed 31 March 2008)

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Misha Glenny, "The Lost War", *Washingtonpost.com*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/17ar2007081701716_p.html (accessed 31 March 2008)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jim Landers, "It's a Recession – in the Illegal Drugs Market", *The Dallas Morning News*, 18 March 2008, <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/bus/columnists/jlanders/stories/DN-landers> (accessed 26 March 2008).

choose this MOE, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that our efforts are futile. A more effective MOE is the availability and price of cocaine on the street. Statistics suggest U.S. efforts are making an impact, as the street value is up and availability is down in major U.S. markets. Eliminating illicit drug flow completely is not a realistic goal, but the Navy and Coast Guard can play a significant role in meeting the President's goal of reducing drug use by 25 percent over the next five years. Ensuring our forces are employed in the most efficient and effective manner calls for a review of operational factors.

War on Drugs - Operational Factors

After thirty-seven years of fighting the War on Drugs, the United States is finally starting to see some return on investment, but producing and selling drugs is still a profitable venture. While there is still a large amount of money to be made, traffickers will continue to attempt to deliver drugs to the United States. The United States must analyze the operational factors of time, space and force to continually adjust its interdiction strategies.

The operational factor of space presents an immense challenge to the U.S. efforts to find traffickers. The transit zone used to traffic drugs consists of roughly 6 million square miles of air and sea space including the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and Eastern Pacific.²² Traffickers, who were interviewed, indicated they were confident that due to the amount of air and sea space required to monitor, the risk of being caught by law enforcement was acceptable. To counter the effects of space, the Coast Guard employs Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) and U.S. Navy Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft with long range surveillance to monitor the sea and air space. The HC-130 Hercules and E2-C Hawkeye are key players because of their ability to monitor great distances and their long on-station times.

²² United States Coast Guard, "Drug Interdiction", <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-o/g-opl/drugs/drugs.htm> (accessed 24 March 2008)

The Coast Guard has also stood up the Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) which consists of eight Coast Guard armed helicopters authorized to employ airborne use of force.²³ These helicopters, capable of speeds up to 140 kts, address the issue of force needed to counter “go fast” boats and help to reduce the effect of space by providing more air assets. The British are also being trained on the basics of airborne use of force to serve as a force multiplier in the transit zone.²⁴ These efforts represent the most formidable threat to drug runners. Former members of the cartels, who were interviewed, indicated the only fear they really had was of surveillance aircraft. However, the majority felt they could still deliver drugs to the United States at will because it was easy to monitor frequencies, the internet, and the news to determine capabilities of the aircraft and where the aircraft were based, and then it was only a matter of waiting the aircraft out or avoiding them.²⁵ The Coast Guard is already working on reducing the effects of space by providing more aircraft to monitor the transit zone.

Also, in order to get its forces closer to the “battle” and remain on station longer, the United States negotiated long-term agreements with multiple countries to operate Forward Operating Locations (FOLs). These are mainly existing airfields that have been modified to allow U.S. aircraft to be forward deployed and closer to the departure points.²⁶ This also counters the effect of time in that we can get our forces to the Area of Responsibility (AOR)

²³ United States Department of Homeland Security, “United States Coast Guard – Fact Sheet”, <http://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/786/52968> (accessed 24 March 2008).

²⁴ Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Transit Zone Interdiction Operations”, <http://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/786/52968> (accessed 24 March 2008)

²⁵ Abt Associates Inc., *Measuring the Deterrent Effect of Enforcement Operations on Drug Smuggling, 1991-1999*, (Washington, DC: Office of National Drug Control Policy, August 2001)

²⁶ Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Fact Sheet - Forward Operating Locations”, http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/forw_oper_locat.html (accessed 24 March 2008)

sooner. FOLs also signal to the traffickers the multilateral approach and cooperation in the theater to combat the drug problem.

On the sea, traffickers indicated that without the use of U.S. or local informants there was little to no fear of being caught. The drug runners have become adept at using deception by purchasing commercial leisure craft and blending in with local boaters during weekends and holidays.²⁷ Additionally, traffickers bribe South American government officials in order to sail through territorial seas where they know they are safe from U.S. forces and law enforcement agencies. The most successful and almost guaranteed method of delivery was the use of hidden compartments on boats.²⁸ If a boat happened to be located, traffickers expressed confidence in the ability to outrun law enforcement assets. However, if it was clear the boat was going to be caught, the traffickers surrendered and authorized a search of the boat since they knew they stood a very good possibility of being cleared because the hidden compartments were difficult to find during a search on the water where the boat could not be dismantled.²⁹ The Coast Guard is addressing this deficiency by sending its boarding officers through a five week course at the Maritime Law Enforcement School that focuses on space accountability and the use of drug dogs and bore scopes.

Once the traffickers make it to the U.S. coastline, there is about 1,700 miles of border on the Gulf Coast available with gentle shores and numerous spots to choose a delivery point. Traffickers reported they could essentially get drugs into the U.S. anytime they wanted

²⁷ Tamara Roliff, *The War on Drugs: Opposing Viewpoints* (Chicago, IL: Greenhaven/Thomson/Gale, 2004) 54

²⁸ Abt Associates Inc., *Measuring the Deterrent Effect of Enforcement Operations on Drug Smuggling, 1991-1999*, (Washington, DC: Office of National Drug Control Policy, August 2001)

²⁹ Ibid

unless there was a law enforcement official who just happened to be in the right spot at the right time.³⁰

The operational factor of force presents another challenge. As Sun Tzu stated, “Know your enemy and yourself and in a hundred battles you will not be defeated.”³¹ The United States entered the War on Drugs and did not know its enemy. The United States has learned a great deal about drug cartels and how they operate, but it still continues to vastly underestimate their resourcefulness. The drug cartels are not driven by traditional military engagement; nor are they deterred by law enforcement and military presence. The drug cartels are simply driven to get their product to market by land, sea, sub-surface, or air in order to make money. The enormous profits a drug producer could realize outweigh the threat and make the risk of being caught acceptable. For instance, producing drugs is a cheap process; cocaine can be bought for \$1,500 a kilo in Colombia and sold in the United States for \$66,000 retail. According to Robert Stutman, a former DEA agent, a cartel could lose the majority of its product and still be profitable.³² So, as long as there are huge profit margins, the drug traffickers will take the risks associated with getting the drugs to market. As our forces get good at stopping one method of trafficking, the drug cartels simply switch strategies or purchase better assets. The methods of getting drugs into the U.S. are only limited by the drug runner’s own creativity.

Traditionally, the drug runners have held the edge in speed, but the Coast Guard has negated that advantage with the use of airborne force from the helicopter squadrons talked about previously. After 9-11 the Coast Guard shifted a significant amount of its assets to

³⁰ Abt Associates Inc., *Measuring the Deterrent Effect of Enforcement Operations on Drug Smuggling, 1991-1999*, (Washington, DC: Office of National Drug Control Policy, August 2001)

³¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. Translated by L. Giles. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, INC, 2002), 51

³² Oriana Zill and Lowell Bergman, “*Do the Math: Why the Illegal Drug Business is Thriving*” Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/special/math.html> (accessed 26 March 2008)

counter-terrorist operations focusing on coastal and port protection, essentially conceding much of the high seas.³³ As such, traffickers reported feeling little to no threat from maritime law enforcement because they knew there were not enough resources assigned to cover the vast space available.³⁴ Based on conversations with Coast Guard personnel, this trend is reversing and many assets are returning to Counter Drug operations.

Interdiction efforts also forced the cartels to adjust their command and control. In the earlier days of drug trafficking, the cartel was controlled by a small group of individuals with one individual controlling the money and trafficking. The leaders were powerful and well-respected, but more importantly they were public figures. As such, they could be targeted and killed or jailed. Law enforcement agencies succeeded in “taking down” leaders and left the cartel in a state of crisis till a new leader emerged. In order to account for this weakness, the cartels split into functional units with each unit fulfilling a major importation tasks. The result was a shift from an organized operation controlled by a few to a number of loosely structured networks that work together to move drugs out of Colombia and money back to the distributors.³⁵

The operational factor of time is critical, especially for the United States. The American public tends to be impatient and expects to see progress and quick results. This mentality favors traffickers, since they can wait out U.S. efforts in the hopes that U.S. public support will dissipate over time.

The main challenge associated with time is the distance between the departure point and the United States. Traffickers have addressed this by using profits to purchase faster

³³ House, *Federal Law Enforcement at the Borders and Ports of Entry: Challenges and Solutions*, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess., 2003, HR 107-794

³⁴ Abt Associates Inc., *Measuring the Deterrent Effect of Enforcement Operations on Drug Smuggling, 1991-1999*, (Washington, DC: Office of National Drug Control Policy, August 2001)

³⁵ Ibid.

boats and by using merchants and air drop techniques to cut the time needed to transit. Traffickers are able to purchase commercial technology that gives them the advantage of faster boats, aircraft and better sensors and radio equipment to monitor U.S. forces movements. As far as receiving new technology, the United States can't keep up because it has to go through the formal bureaucratic acquisition process to acquire new radars or sensors. The process at times can take a period of years.

Traffickers have the element of surprise on their side. We have no idea which method of delivery traffickers will choose to employ or to which of our unprotected ports the drugs will be delivered through. The United States has few resources and has to decide where to best focus them.

Recommendations

The U.S. Coast Guard is the lead U.S. agency for maritime drug interdiction and should remain so. Civilian law enforcement agencies could not take over maritime interdiction because they don't have the resources. The Navy has the resources to take over the mission, but the majority of them are allocated to other theaters and to the GWOT. However, even if the Navy did not have resources allocated to the GWOT, there would be a great deal of training required for naval personnel assigned to this mission since the Navy is not proficient in law enforcement. Resources would have to be allocated to the War on Drugs which could result in gaps in fifth and sixth fleet, something DoD would not be willing to do. The Coast Guard possesses law enforcement capability and the experience that comes from years of operational experience carrying out this mission. There are improvements that, if implemented, could improve Coast Guard's maritime interdiction efforts.

Based on interviews with former traffickers, the greatest threat to making a successful run to the United States was surveillance aircraft, but they reported that it was easy to get information on flights. If this is true, then the flight schedules, search areas and locations of FOLs should be classified information. Classifying flight information and randomizing times and search patterns would bring the element of surprise to the United States. Once aircraft are airborne, proper communications security (COMSEC) procedures should be used in order to make it more difficult for traffickers to intercept transmissions.

On the sea, the United States does not have assets in the theater with the speed or high tech surveillance capabilities needed to locate and track traffickers. The Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) would fill this requirement. LCS features speeds of 45 kts allowing it to quickly respond to surface coordinates provided by surveillance aircraft. The LCS can carry two helicopters to extend its surveillance area and has a robust communications suite, allowing it to network with joint assets. The ship also features the latest in three dimensional radar technologies capable of tracking air and surface contacts. Latest news releases indicate the Navy will announce the establishment of the Fourth Fleet based out of Mayport, FL responsible for naval operations in the Caribbean and Southern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.³⁶ This new fleet will require assets capable of supporting its missions and one way to do this is to assign the LCS. When an LCS commissions, it would join SECOND Fleet

³⁶ Brumley, Jeff. "Mayport to get 4th Fleet," *Florida Times Union*, 09 April 2008

and complete its required training. Once it attains its certifications, the ship would then be assigned to 4th Fleet to gain real time operational experience conducting counter drug operations. Upon completion of a tour in 4th Fleet, the ship would then be available to deploy to Fifth or Sixth Fleet. As more LCSs are commissioned, it would become a standard rotation for ships to gain operational experience in 4th Fleet.

Final Remarks

The United States maritime drug interdiction efforts are making an impact in the War on Drugs. Drug prices are on the rise and drug traffickers are forced to continually adjust their routes to our interdiction strategies. If the United States really wants to “win” the War on Drugs, now is the time to intensify the efforts and apply the right mixture of air and surface assets to the fight.

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