

Whither Colombia, America?

Money laundering and drug trafficking stretch from the streets to banks to the government. And it costs us.

By **RACHEL EHRENFELD**

Bill Clinton campaigned on a theme of change. Now, he has many promises to fulfill. No doubt many disappointments lie ahead, but as America attempts to reassess problems of urban decay, rampant crime, social unrest and AIDS, the Clinton Administration should focus attention on one of the major causes of these evils: drug trafficking.

Just three months ago, President Bush and his drug czar, Bob Martinez, declared that the United States was winning the war on drugs. Colombian President Cesar Gaviria made a similar declaration just before Pablo Escobar escaped from his luxurious detention resort last July. The fact is, the winners remain the drug traffickers and money launderers. The United States will never be Colombia, but it is barreling down the road of corruption and self-destruction in its inability to control drug trafficking. A review of recent Colombian history might provide the Clinton Administration some insights on how *not* to fight a war on drugs.

Colombia, the oldest Latin American democracy, lost its independence in 1991, when Gaviria and the legislature changed the constitution to amend currency and extradition policies, among other things, and accepted the business of drug trafficking as a lesser of two evils. The driving force behind this metamorphosis was greed; the vehicle, cocaine.

Armed with untold financial resources, drug cartels have penetrated and corrupted the government, subverted commerce and industry and eroded the individual's trust in government. Escobar's surrender in 1991 sparked rumors about the demise of the Medellin cartel that proved false.

As for the power of the government to control the drug cartels and their members, it is sufficient to recall the circumstances of Escobar's imprisonment and escape from a luxurious and supposedly maximum-security prison. Yet the Colombian government continues to claim that it is in control and, together with the United States, winning the war on drugs.

Sound familiar? President Bush recently cited a 60% decline in cocaine use among young people to support his claim of victory in the war on drugs. "Drug use is no longer trendy and is slowly but surely exorcised from our society," Martinez said. But Sen. Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, disagreed: "America's drug epidemic is worse today, with more than 67% of high school students using drugs."

Drug trafficking is an evil acknowledged by all nations. After years of struggle, governments and law enforcement agencies have concluded that the only way to combat drugs is to control drug money laundering.

Money laundering has a profoundly corrosive effect on democratic society. What makes the problem really terrifying is that the corruption it brings stretches from street corners, pizza parlors, automobile dealers, jewelry manufacturers and local banks to the marble foyers of international financial and political institutions.

Corruption is not a new phenomenon, but drug trafficking has elevated it to new levels. Years of silence, indifference and willful blindness have greatly exacerbated the problem. When an elder statesman of the Democratic Party of the caliber of Clark Clifford, former defense secretary and adviser to Democratic presidents from Truman to Carter, was seduced by the notorious Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), no one seems safe from the reach of the colossal resources at the disposal of the drug lords.

International drug trafficking has had a devastating effect on American society. Addiction, street crime and the near geometric increase in incidence of AIDS are the agonizing outcomes. The effect on the political and banking systems is more subtle. The estimate is \$1 trillion lost worldwide, up to \$250 billion in the U.S.

Like the Colombians, Americans have ceased to believe that government can do much to control the corruption stemming from drug trafficking, drug abuse, drug-related crime and gang warfare.

While selling drugs is criminal, money laundering has come to be considered almost legitimate. Nothing has compromised the well-being of America as much. The rampant corruption of Colombia may now be taking place in the United States. The next move is Bill Clinton's. His drug policy will give a clear indication of how committed he is to change.

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