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Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in  
Latin America (review)

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Carpenter, Ted Galen. *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America*. New York: Palgrave, 2003. Index, 288 pp.; hardcover \$24.95.

If the title of this book is too subtle for any would-be readers, the author's straightforward, no-nonsense writing makes clear, repeatedly, that the U.S. war on drugs in Latin America has failed miserably since the 1970s. Indeed, prohibition has failed since the United States adhered to the Hague Convention for the control of opium sales in 1912 and passed the Harrison Narcotic Act in 1914. The prohibitionist strategy, based on interdiction, crop eradication, crop substitution programs, "carrot and stick" certification-decertification programs, and, more recently, increased militarization of the "drug war," has not decreased supply, overall acreage of drug crops in production, or drug consumption in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere.

Moreover, Carpenter affirms, "the bottom line is that, no matter what the specific configuration of tactics, the supply-side campaign against illicit drugs is doomed to fail. As long as there is a substantial global demand for those drugs, the supply will continue to flow" (pp. 120–21). Judged by its consequences, not its intentions, the war on drugs over the past three decades has been a colossal failure (p. 229).

As if this situation were not terrible enough, U.S. antidrug policies and "Washington's 'Ugly American' Tactics" (chapter 5) have increased latent and manifest anti-Americanism and exacerbated poverty and social tensions throughout much of the hemisphere. Increased militarization of the antidrug policies has led to higher levels of corruption, more human rights violations, and delegitimation of elected governments in Latin America, while U.S. government agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Defense and Justice departments, violate international law and the sovereignty of Latin American states. Thus Washington's hemispheric war on drugs is the epitome of a "Bad Neighbor Policy" (p. 9). Anecdotes, war stories, and citations of news reports throughout the book illustrate colorfully all these types of failures and the "collateral damage" they have caused.

Demand reduction policies have also failed. Everyone knows that is true for the United States and Europe, but "even Islamic fundamentalist Iran now concedes that it has a serious drug consumption problem" (pp. 118–19).

Carpenter asserts that it is not drug use and commerce that create most of the social problems attributed to them; instead, as in the U.S. Prohibition Era of the 1920s and early 1930s, the worst problems are caused by "the incentive structures created by a prohibitionist strategy combined with the harsh measures employed to enforce the drug laws" (p. 154). The bloodbath in Colombia, the backlash from eradication programs in

Bolivia, the horrors in Peru, including the rise of Sendero Luminoso, and the corruption and violence in Mexico, Central America, and much of the Andean region all demonstrate that Latin America is reaping a tempest from the wind of drug prohibition sown by U.S. policy (chapter 6).

Although concern for the collapse of the Colombian state and the potential for insurgencies and terrorism in the Andean region dominated U.S. policy in the 1990s, parallel developments in Mexico, where “drug organizations were rivaling or even surpassing the strength of Colombian cartels,” may be even more menacing to the United States. Again, a root cause is the prohibitionist strategy, for “as is always the case with lucrative black markets . . . the trade has been accompanied by escalating corruption and violence” (p. 169).

This corruption extends wide and deep in police and military ranks, from the streets of Mexico’s major cities and towns to the Defense Ministry (including a general named as Mexico’s drug czar) and the interstices of the *camarillas* of Mexican presidents and their advisers. Carpenter’s chapter 7, “Mexico: The Next Colombia,” recounts news stories, interviews, and research on increasing cartel penetration of Mexican politics and daily life since the 1980s. The associated increase in violent crime and corruption demonstrates that “the prohibitionist strategy is an exercise in futility, not just in Mexico but in any country where the drug trade plays a significant economic role” (p. 185). Accordingly, if the United States does not change its prohibitionist strategy and policies, there is a risk that Mexico might “go down the same tragic path as Colombia. . . . U.S. officials need to ask whether they want to risk ‘another Colombia’” (p. 193).

Then there is the drug war’s effect at home in the United States: the “polluting of the Republic” (chapter 8). Carpenter recalls that President Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs in the 1970s, and President Ronald Reagan issued a presidential directive declaring drugs a threat to national security in 1986. The naming of the former head of the U.S. Army Southern Command, retired general Barry McCaffrey, as director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (or “drug czar”), and the increasing militarization and violence associated with drug policy made the idea of a drug war much less a metaphor in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Across the U.S. domestic political spectrum, from right to left, the idea of a drug war took hold and inspired “crazy” legislative and administrative responses that threatened civil liberties and civil rights. Even a civil rights leader and liberal politician like Jesse Jackson charged that “treason abounds in the war on drugs,” labeling drug pushers as “terrorists” (p. 198). Increasing proportions of prisoners in federal and state prisons were incarcerated for drug offenses. Gang turf wars in major urban areas for control of the drug trade left ever more victims, innocent and otherwise.

Carpenter argues that the drug war also erodes constitutional civil liberties, especially the Fourth Amendment, which protects citizens against unreasonable search and seizure. These abuses have moved far beyond drug cases, a sort of constitutional collateral damage of the drug war. Critics of the drug war are censored and threatened. In short, “police-state tactics” have been a domestic consequence of the war on drugs in Latin America and around the globe (chapter 8). After discussing the expanding intrusion of government into the private lives of Americans, their banking, their travel, their computer Internet usage, and so on, Carpenter concludes that Americans “can end the failed crusade against drugs or they can watch as those disasters burgeon in size and multiply in number” (p. 222).

How can we do that? With “a blueprint for peace.” The basic feature of this “blueprint” is ending the war on drugs (chapter 9). Not unexpectedly, Carpenter argues that “the only realistic way out of this policy morass is to adopt a regime of drug legalization” (p. 229). This conclusion is not based on an idealized future; Carpenter acknowledges that legalization is not a panacea, just better than the alternative, which is to continue suffering the consequences of prohibition and the ongoing war on drugs detailed in the volume. At least, even if we are unable to dismantle the prohibitionist strategy in the United States, Carpenter suggests that Americans should have the decency not to continue inflicting the many follies of the drug war on our neighbors in Latin America (p. 230).

Readers do not have to be libertarians to agree with the author’s extended editorial, spiced with relevant anecdotes, favoring legalization-decriminalization of drug use and commerce. Even without original research or much mention of the vast academic and NGO human rights literature (Washington Office on Latin America, Human Rights Watch) on the U.S. drug war (the book has chapter notes referring mostly to media reportage, but no bibliography), Carpenter persuasively documents the drug war’s failure to achieve its stated objectives. Of course, this outcome has been recognized by many previous books, articles, and research studies by think tanks across the political spectrum (from the Heritage Foundation to the Institute for Policy Studies) and by U.S. government agencies and Congress in official reports (General Accounting Office, Congressional Testimony, DEA, SouthCom, reports by specialists at the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute) for the last two decades.

While Carpenter’s book adds a very readable title to the many volumes that document the drug war’s failure, his “blueprint for peace” falls short of providing any detail to guide construction of a new regional security structure based on drug legalization or decriminalization. He calls on Latin Americans to overcome the statist tradition, to deregulate, to rely on private enterprise and free trade, to create jobs, and to avoid the distortions of their economies, political corruption, and violence

associated with the drug war. In effect, he calls on Latin Americans to go one step beyond the neoliberal agenda that has made millions of Latin Americans poorer, reduced the capacity and legitimacy of governments in the hemisphere, and shredded most vestiges of social solidarity that remained after years of military dictatorships or civilian authoritarian regimes in the 1970–90 era.

Perhaps more important, Carpenter stops short of telling and finishing the story of the “bad neighbor policy,” a story in which the drug war is only a small part of the U.S. neoliberal assault on the hemisphere and the effort to consolidate and manage U.S. regional hegemony with the Pentagon as the “lead agency.” Carpenter argues that if the drug war ended, Latin American governments would no longer “have to dissemble in a futile attempt to satisfy the conflicting demands of the United States and their own citizens.” To Americans he offers a reduction in prison populations, recovery of some liberty, and elimination of income from drugs for international terrorists.

While these predictions might be partly true (because no “test” of a legalization policy is in the immediate offing, we cannot know how true), they somewhat underestimate the overall negative impact of U.S. policy in the hemisphere and the capacity of the Pentagon, SouthCom, the DEA, and other agencies to “reinvent the wheel” to ensure bureaucratic survival and expansion. The war against subversion and “Castro communism” of the Cold War era had already become the war against the narcoterrorists in the Andean region and international terrorism elsewhere by the late 1990s. SouthCom and the civilian defense establishment, the careers and influence of which depended on the credibility of some remaining (or new) security threats in Latin America, had found the “new” enemy they required to justify to Congress their activities and funding in the post–Cold War era. The only threats to U.S. security in the Western Hemisphere worthy of specific mention in the Department of Defense’s 1999 annual report were drug trafficking and its spinoffs, along with undocumented immigration to the United States. According to Marcella, in a report published by the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, “the United States Southern Command (SouthCom), in Panama and later in Miami, became the unified command par excellence for counternarcotics. At one time, nearly 90 percent of its operations involved counternarcotics support” (2003, 58). Without the drug war in the 1990s, SouthCom had virtually no operational missions.

After the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the Pentagon and the White House melded the drug war with the war against terrorism. Indeed, beyond the historical urge for hegemony in the Western Hemisphere characteristic of U.S. Latin American policy, domestic politics, bureaucratic politics, and institutional inertia have created domestic constituencies for the drug war that are

difficult to overcome. Of course, this was also the case when the United States signed on to the 1912 Hague Convention: “the United States State Department saw a way not only to solve the War Department’s Philippine opium problem but also to please American missionaries and traders” (Brecher 1972). It was also true when Congress passed the 1914 Harrison Narcotic Act, of which the chief proponent was Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, a populist prohibitionist with a strong missionary urge. Since that time, uncountable congressional committees, state legislatures, and learned commissions have studied the “drug problem” and produced still more prohibitionist legislation—all of which has failed to produce the intended effects.

By 1970, Congress had passed 55 federal drug laws to supplement the 1914 Harrison Act (not including legislation on alcohol prohibition); the 50 state legislatures passed hundreds more (Brecher 1972). Almost a century of failure did not prevent the DEA in 2003 from opportunistically linking the drug war to the war on terrorism. Flash—May 20, 2003:

“The War on Terror and the War on Drugs are linked,” a high-ranking DEA official recently told the Senate Judiciary Committee. “Thirty-nine percent of the State Department’s current list of designated foreign terrorist organizations have some degree of connection with drug activities,” he said. In his May 20th testimony, Steven Casteel, Assistant DEA Administrator for Intelligence, said that “whether a group is committing terrorist acts, trafficking drugs or laundering money, the one constant to remember is that they are all forms of organized crime.” (DEA 2003)

Carpenter is entirely correct: prohibition has failed. But there is no reason to assume that a libertarian “blueprint” for Latin America (reducing further the capacity and resources of Latin American governments and allowing the “free market” to operate) would solve the many problems partly attributable to the war on drugs. Indeed, it is clear to all except the blind that the neoliberal-, U.S. Treasury-, IMF-inspired economic policies and the remilitarization of domestic law enforcement and political intelligence supported by the DoD, DEA, and other U.S. government agencies further exacerbate the inequalities, injustice, and lack of democratic governance characteristic of Latin America for most of its history. Unrestrained capitalism, even if it is now called “market democracy,” is not the answer for all or even most of the ills afflicting Latin America.

Americans seem to love a morality play; they despise “reality,” which makes the legalization-decriminalization alternatives unlikely, as Carpenter laments, and makes “law and order” a good political sell despite its failure since 1912–14. What Americans, and Carpenter, have not absorbed is that U.S. foreign policy, largely the result of an ever more corrupt and perverse domestic political system, is often immoral

(not just “realist”), imperial, interventionist, unilateral, and illegal by the standards of international law. It is not just that the drug war inflicts distortions on Latin American economies, encourages corruption, and generates political violence. U.S. security and economic policies toward Latin America, and the way they are implemented, have often undermined democratic governance, respect for civil liberties and human rights, and more socially responsible economic development. The United States has subordinated Latin American politics and socioeconomic development to whatever current security policies (anti-British, anti-German, antifascist, anticommunist, antiterrorist) and economic trends dominate U.S. domestic politics—and to U.S. economic, political, and security interests as they are understood by those who dominate U.S. politics.

Carpenter’s account of the war on drugs ends before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the conflating of the antidrug and antiterrorism wars. He harbors some hope that the George W. Bush administration is “at least dimly aware of the problem” and might be persuaded that “repudiating the use of coercive measures to get Latin American governments to cooperate in the drug war should be the first step” (pp. 150–51). In practice, U.S. Latin American policy since 9/11 again has made evident that the drug war is only part of a much more extensive “bad neighbor policy.”

There is, as Carpenter advises, a need for a real blueprint for an alternative security structure that would include an end to the war on drugs. That drug trafficking is intertwined with the international arms trade, money laundering, terrorism, and all sorts of other commercial endeavors, legal and illegal, makes the task of designing such a blueprint no easier. Likewise, the deep corruption of military, police, judicial, and legislative institutions in the United States and Latin America is an obstacle to any coherent policy initiative. Even if decriminalization of all drug commerce and use (combined with some sort of drug quality control or regulation by a Food and Drug Administration–type agency) were agreed on, it would only be a small, if important, step in ending the more pervasive “bad neighbor policy” that dominates U.S.-Latin American relations.

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Levitsky, Steven. *Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2003. Tables, figures, bibliography, index, 290 pp.; hardcover \$70, paperback \$25.

Studies of parties in Latin America have traditionally focused on party histories, ideology, formal organization, and above all, the party system. With a few rare exceptions, scholars have only recently begun to study the internal workings of parties in Latin America in ways that build on the research being done in the advanced industrial democracies. Steven Levitsky's study of Argentina's Partido Justicialista (PJ) stands at the forefront of this new trend. His book is primarily a case study of the Peronist party over the past half-century, focusing mainly on changes since the transition to democracy in 1983. His analysis of the PJ's organization and program finds that the party's extraordinary ability to adapt and survive is not so much a product of the challenges it has encountered in its environment but a result of its organization: thanks to its charismatic origins and lack of formal internal rules, the party enjoys an extraordinary level of flexibility.

The result of his work is a book that not only adds to our understanding of one of Latin America's most notorious parties, but provides useful theoretical insights for the study of parties and politics across all regions. His work sets high standards of research, conceptualizing, and theorizing, and it gives impetus and direction to the study of political parties in Latin America.

Most of the book's argument is laid out nicely in the first chapter, and those readers most interested in the theoretical contributions will want to focus on this part. Here, Levitsky focuses on the concept of party institutionalization, suggesting the need to distinguish two competing and independent attributes; namely, value infusion (how much an organization comes to be valued for its own sake) and routinization (the degree to which formal rules define organizational life). While the former may contribute to party stability, the latter does not necessarily. Indeed, low routinization may give parties significant flexibility in the face of external challenges by allowing for faster renovation of party leadership, change in the program and electoral strategy, and reform of the party organization.