

A Certifiable Drug Policy

Commentary

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"It's not fair, it isn't working and it doesn't serve a purpose." That pithy judgment, by Mexican President-elect Vicente Fox, is of the annual process the United States uses to certify whether Mexico and other drug-producing countries have "cooperated fully" in the fight against drugs.

Fox has promised to give this issue high priority in his meeting with President Clinton here tomorrow, pushing for an end to the whole U.S. certification program. His judgment is right, and the administration may even agree; certainly Gen. Barry McCaffrey, the national drug control policy director, has said much the same. But so far, Congress has fiercely resisted any change, because the present situation serves U.S. party politics too well.

In 1985, corrupt Mexican officials had a hand in the torture and murder of a Drug Enforcement Agency agent, Kiki Camarena. An outraged Congress passed legislation requiring that the State Department annually assess each country involved in producing or trafficking in illegal drugs to the United States. Those found not to have cooperated fully with U.S. drug control efforts would be subject to a variety of economic sanctions. Each year much of Latin America has gnashed its teeth when the scolding report appears.

It is a sense of insult rather than potential injury that provokes this hostility, because the threat of decertification seems decreasingly credible. Sanctions are rarely imposed and mean little when they are.

In the past decade only Colombia, among Latin American countries, has ever been decertified—that was for the two years after the revelation that Cali traffickers had bankrolled President Ernesto Samper's campaign. Decertification turned out to have almost no consequence for Colombia. U.S. agencies continued to work with their counterparts as before.

Meanwhile, Mexico, the principal transshipment country for U.S. cocaine and a producer of heroin and marijuana, has never been decertified, though its drug control has been riddled with corruption at the highest levels for the past four years. In 1998, its top drug official was convicted of taking bribes from the principal trafficker.

Persistent corruption has deep roots in the political history of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, and in the country's rural poverty. U.S. pressure for change can't be expected to be more than a minor influence on either, particularly if that pressure is seen as adversarial rather than supportive.

Certification rests on a common-sense moral claim. Drugs that damage our society are produced elsewhere. If foreign countries could stem the flow, the United States would be less harmed.

But Mexico and other Latin American countries with large drug-trafficking problems have a compelling argument, too: The world's largest drug market is what generates their problems. No producer country is essential; Bolivia has all but abandoned the cocaine business, but Colombia has stepped up production to fill the gap.

Tough policies may affect which countries produce and distribute the drugs, but they have little prospect of reducing the flow to the United States. If, however, we could cut demand, then the whole Latin American

industry would decline.

Producer countries argue that they are the ones hurt by the U.S. failure to curb demand, since trafficking breeds corruption and creates violent gangs with a strong economic base. These countries are thus pressing for a mutual evaluation process under the Organization of American States (OAS).

In fact, certification doesn't further U.S. or Latin American goals. What it has done is serve a Republican Congress well in whipping a Democratic administration. And for six years before that it served a Democratic Congress equally well in whipping a Republican administration.

Each year sees threats to overturn Mexico's certification, as Congress has the right to do within a 30-day period. The threats spark some headlines but little action. The OAS process, already in effect, results mainly in watered-down reports that offend no one and do not allow Congress a pulpit or an active role.

Certification is a demonstrable flop. Morally suspect, it ignores the U.S. contribution to the drug flow problem. The assumption driving it is that the producer countries can restrict the production of psychoactive substances, even though the United States—spending \$35 billion on drug control—can't. And it greatly complicates the already strained U.S. dealings with Mexico.

The outrage that certification generates in Mexico is simply not worth the slight value it may have in helping curb drug use here. Only shrinking demand at home, whether by better targeted enforcement or treatment, can reduce our country's drug problem.

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