
Preface

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Robert Lessmann's insightful book, *Drogenökonomie und Internationale Politik/now: Der Drogenkrieg in den Anden*, has stood the test of time. It is not often that a policy-oriented publication is released as a second edition some twenty years later. But in this case, Lessmann's book remains as relevant – if not more so – today. Providing extensive on-the-ground documentation of the impact of the U.S. “war on drugs,” Lessmann focuses on the Andean region of South America, where that war was launched with devastating consequences for those on its frontlines. He reports from Bolivia and Colombia as U.S. engagement – and military presence – was escalating rapidly. In both countries, counter-drug policies have led to human rights violations, conflict and violence and have pushed some of the world's poorest people even deeper into poverty.

Decades and billions of U.S. dollars later, the illicit drug trade remains deeply entrenched in Latin America; nonetheless, the U.S. counter-drug policies documented by Lessmann remain largely intact today. Under the Obama administration, the rhetoric has certainly changed: U.S. officials no longer refer to the “drug war” and have placed far greater attention on U.S. demand for illicit drugs, publicly recognizing the role that such demand plays in stimulating the drug trade. Some important changes are taking place domestically, within the United States. President Obama's signature health care reform, the Affordable Care Act, mandates provision of drug treatment for those who need it (previously only an estimated 8 % of those needing treatment had access to it). Despite the fact that cannabis remains illegal under federal law, the Obama administration has responded cautiously in response to the states that have created legal, regulated marijuana markets, adopting a “trust but verify” approach. Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. Department of Justice has initiated regulatory reforms to reduce the number of those incarcerated for drug offenses, for the first time moving away from the mass incarceration strategies that have resulted in the United States having the highest number of prisoners per capita of any country in the world.

Yet at the same time, Washington's international drug control policies remain largely on auto-pilot. The U.S. government remains wedded to the forced eradication of the coca plant (the raw material used in manufacturing cocaine.), as documented by Lessmann in Bolivia and Colombia. When the government of the Plurinational State of Bolivia attempted to remove the provision of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs that coca leaf chewing be abolished within 25 years – in recognition of the traditional and other legitimate uses of the coca leaf in that country – the U.S. government led the charge opposing its effort, and won. Moreover, according to press reports, on any given day, as many as 4,000 U.S. troops are deployed across Latin America on counter-drug missions. U.S. navy ships and Air Force planes are on patrol seeking out drug shipments, while a myriad of U.S. training programs are operating on the ground. In short, despite the change in rhetoric, the U.S. “war on drugs” is alive and well in Latin America. Lessmann's account of the early years of the drug war therefore provides keen insights into present day policies.

Those insights, in turn, support those within the region advocating for significant drug policy reforms. In recent years, Latin America has witnessed an unprecedented debate on drug policy, stemming in large part from growing recognition that these long-standing policies have failed to achieve the stated objectives and the very high cost of implementing those policies. Once confined to established routes, the drug trade has proliferated from the Southern Cone to Mexico and illicit drug use has increased significantly in many countries. More than 40 years after the “war on drugs” was launched, most Latin American countries face far deeper problems with drug trafficking and drug dependency. Jails are bursting at the seams with low-level, non-violent offenders; drug-related violence has increased exponentially in some countries; and drug-related corruption is rife across the region.

As a result, for the first time, sitting presidents are now calling for recognition of the failure of the present international drug control regime and experimentation with new approaches. Their calls for reform have been taken up both regionally, in the Organization of American States, and internationally, within the United Nations. Indeed, at the request of Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico, in 2016, the United Nations will convene a General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) specifically related to drugs, the highest-level debate on the international drug control system in recent history. While the international drug control system remains firmly entrenched, the consensus that has sustained it for so long has begun to crumble and important reform efforts are now underway.

Bolivia – the country at the heart of Lessmann's book – is one of the few countries in the region that has said no to the “war on drugs” approach. After coca-grower leader Evo Morales became president in January 2006, the government adopted a “coca yes, cocaine no” strategy which seeks to decrease coca cultivation through

economic development; in other words, by providing coca growers with other viable sources of income. Those efforts have paid off, as Bolivia has benefitted from sustained economic growth and steady reductions in coca cultivation in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The end of forced coca eradication in all areas of the country except for national parks has also put an end to the human rights violations, social unrest and violence that had proliferated in the country's coca growing regions. In addition, the Morales administration is finally beginning to reform its draconian drug law, Law 1008, reportedly drafted by individuals connected to the U.S. government.

The fact that the U.S. government has continued to implement policies that have now clearly failed to meet even its own stated objectives has led to a plethora of conspiracy theories about the "real" motives behind U.S. policy. Lessmann's book, however, proves them wrong, showing how in fact bad policies are made as a result of entrenched bureaucracies and funding flows, having dozens of agencies with a stake in policy continuity and members of the U.S. congress who fear being seen as "soft on drugs" in their home districts or states, among other factors. He explains the political tendencies and forces at the root of the policies, as well as the flawed perceptions that drive them. Lessmann achieved this through exhaustive research in the city where these policies were forged, Washington, D.C., where he spent countless hours reviewing congressional testimonies, legislation and other documents and federal government reports. The extensive use of these primary sources is one of the strongest strengths of the book and sets it apart from other publications on related topics.

In fact, I first became friends and colleagues with Lessmann when he asked for a meeting to discuss his research and then proceeded to set up camp in my office in order to go through all of my files of such sources. At the time, I was a Senior Associate at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), responsible for the organizations' work on the Andes and on U.S. drug control policy. WOLA promotes human rights, democracy, and social justice by working with partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to shape policies in the United States and abroad. When Lessmann was doing his research, I was also documenting and denouncing the impact of U.S. international drug control policies on human rights and democracy in the Andean region in particular. In other words, we shared a common concern about what was happening on the ground in countries like Bolivia, Peru and Colombia and a commitment to end the "war on drugs," while promoting more humane and effective alternatives. Thus began a long, collaborative relationship that has benefitted both of our work.

In conclusion, Lessmann's book is a must-read for scholars, activists and those wanting to learn more about the roots of U.S. drug control policies, their impact on the ground, and signs of change. Over 20 years ago, when his book was first

published in 1996, Lessmann may have thought he was at the end of a journey. In fact, it was only the beginning of his significant and long-standing contribution to scholarly and activist research on the Andean region of South America and international drug control policies.

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