

A Narrative of Coercion and Repression

The Impact of the US War on Drugs &
Economic Pressure on Peruvian Society



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Abstract

In 1971, US President Richard Nixon declared an official War on Drugs at the international level. This complex campaign sought to shift blame for the proliferation of drug abuse in the US onto coca-leaf producing Latin American countries, like Peru. This paper analyses the way in which the US government applied intense economic pressure to Peru through threatening to retract vital aid, to interfere with the country's internal politics. It emphasizes the anti-communist Cold War climate which resulted in the aggressive targeting of Peruvian campesinos due to the perception that they were part of the leftists, guerilla group, Sendero Luminoso. The article analyzes the detrimental outcomes of this financial coercion, seen through the uprooting of livelihoods in the eradication of coca crops, mass human rights abuses inflicted onto citizens, and the subsequent sense of distrust in modern Peruvian political institutions.

Introduction

United States (US) intervention in Latin American affairs during the latter half of the twentieth century is rooted in a domestic goal of strengthening the nation's post-war superpower status through the use of clandestine, postmodern, and imperialist tactics. This highly interventionist approach in Latin America formed part of a larger global initiative to secure the US's status internationally. As part of a campaign to contain the expansion of communism, the US launched an official war on drugs in the competitive, international Cold War climate, and engaged in what has commonly been described as a "chemical Cold War" (Reiss 2014, 216). In Latin America, this effort was heavily concentrated in Peru, as the US targeted Peruvian-based guerilla leftist insurgency groups, most notably that of Sendero Luminoso. The US perceived this organisation, located in Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley, as becoming particularly entrenched in the drug trading that originated from coca-growing regions and fed into other markets, most notably that of the US. Susanna Reiss, author of *We Sell Drugs: The Alchemy of US Empire*, explains that "a new vision of the hazards of uncontrolled drug production and consumption became a critical weapon in the US Cold War arsenal as it sought to secure its hegemony on a global scale" (216).

The fight against drugs can be perceived as a veil for the historically rooted, complex fear of communist expansion. This essay will argue that the intense economic pressure that the United States placed on Peru throughout the War on Drugs had a large-scale, detrimental impact

on the country, most notably in the form of upending the nation's subsistence-based local economies, spurring highly repressive and abusive state policies, and fostering a perpetual distrust in government institutions among civilians.

The United States' War on Drugs

The War on Drugs, specifically the period spanning from 1980 to 1999, developed under a prohibitionist formula, enabled the US to brand narcotics as a universal enemy and divide the world into rival groups of producers versus consumers (Labate 2016, 126). This pitted modernised, economically powerful countries against their supposed underdeveloped and corrupt counterparts. The catalyst to this conflict was the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs signed by 73 nations, which declared heroin, cocaine, and marijuana, among various other drugs, to be illegal (126). In 1971, the United Nations (UN) enacted the Convention on Psychotropic Substances to strengthen the previous legislation, and later declared an official war on drugs (126). In a proclamation from the same year that sought to formally shift blame for the proliferation of narcotics away from the US, President Nixon stated that “foreign groups introduced ‘poisons’ of body and soul to corrupt US society” (23). This announcement set the precedent for the US’ stance on the international drug trade in the decades that followed.

The US intensely monitored Peru's commitment to the drug war. Any sign that Peru was avoiding its responsibilities, at least from a strict American perspective, would result in economic pressure through monetary incentives and threats of retracting aid. The American government offered military and financial support as well as new sources of agricultural revenue in exchange for Peruvian cooperation in demolishing the coca leaf industry. Furthermore, the US set standards for aid by creating a policy of certification, demanding that any country receiving financial benefits must maintain this certification status; if decertified, sanctions would be imposed. Certification status thus had serious implications on Latin American countries, as it determined whether a country was regarded as an ally or an enemy to one of the most powerful nations in the world.

Achieving and maintaining certification status placed certain demands on the Peruvian government, including eradicating coca crops, the main ingredient in cocaine, seizing a predetermined quota of cocaine, and taking steps to limit illegal shipments (129). This system created a proxy government under US control and left Peru with no other option than to comply due to its dependence on US aid. Once

Peruvian politicians proved their willingness to eradicate the peasant-dominated coca sector, the US subsequently passed the Andean Trade Preference Act in 1991, which removed protectionist policies on Peruvian exports to the US (127). These various measures of coercion created an unavoidable cycle of dependence, which is embodied in the language of a 1992 congressional document that noted that US aid would “depend heavily on signs of continued or greater progress than we [Congress] have seen in the past” (Committee on Foreign Affairs 1992, 11). This document simultaneously diminished Peru’s firm commitment to the War and directly threatened to suspend a vital source of aid. By declaring an international war on drugs, the US positioned itself as a victim to supposedly ‘contaminated’ Latin American countries that were responsible for high rates of drug use on US soil (Labate 2016, 127). However, if anything, it is these countries who became victims of the US.

Destruction of a Coca Leaf Economy

The coca leaf is deeply entrenched in Peru’s history, with evidence of coca usage as early as 1800 BCE (Hutchison 2009, 3). Due to its high impact on the labour force, it has always been a crucial component of the economy, serving as both a source of foreign trade and as a steady source of income. Coca leaves have always played an integral role in the lives of Andean peasants in the Upper Huallaga Valley, where anywhere from 60,000 to 300,000 families depended on farming coca in the 1980s (McClintock 1988, 128). This region has an ideal climate for coca cultivation, and as of 1989, produced half of the world’s coca leaves. Upon harvesting, the leaves were converted into coca paste and sent elsewhere, primarily Colombia, for processing (Americas Watch 1992, 123). Prior to 1971, the Peruvian government regulated coca production through the National Coca Enterprise, which required domestic producers to register their businesses (Keefer 2010, 229). The commodity created anywhere from twenty-five to 75 percent of annual export earnings and generated approximately \$700 million in profits per year. In the mid-1980s, most peasant families had incomes ranging from \$8,000 to \$50,000 annually, depending on crop output (McClintock 1988, 129). Coca was Peru’s informal life support system and the foundation of its economy (Americas Watch 1992, 123).

When the War on Drugs commenced, coca eradication efforts took effect immediately. While the US government played an important role, these efforts were primarily led by the Peruvian-based Special Project for the Control and Eradication of Coca in the Upper Huallaga (CORAH) (McClintock 1988, 13). CORAH engaged in various operations in

prominent coca-growing regions, such as Operation Verde Mar in Tingo Maria, where they would apply aggressive measures such as setting fire to crops. This left the soil infertile, leaving many farmers unable to plant crops for the next ten years (Hutchison 2009, 8). Farmers were rarely warned before CORAH destroyed their crops, and no aid was provided for losses sustained (7). While the US had promised that farmers would be reimbursed for crops that were demolished, they were only offered \$300 per hectare, an amount that covered a tiny percentage of their losses (McClintock 1988, 130).

Under President Reagan in 1981, the US drafted a plan to transfer money to Peru in an effort to reduce the country's dependency on coca and begin producing alternative crops (Hutchison 2009, 11). With this system, farmers were forced to take out loans with two per cent interest rates over ten years, a measure that only further deepened the economic strife of coca workers (12). The alternative crops plan was underfunded, highly unsuccessful, and left peasants with uprooted crops and livelihoods. In addition, a US-organised mission, Operation CONDOR, inflicted terror onto leftist-leaning governments to unite Latin American countries under one central organisation with shared goals. CONDOR officials directly collaborated in eradication efforts, and by 1988, forty-four coca-processing laboratories were destroyed under their control (McClintock 1988, 131). Using high-tech American equipment, CONDOR-led agents were able to venture into remote jungle areas in the Andes (Hutchison 2009, 13). The eradication missions were successful in the short term because they destroyed many coca crops; however, they ultimately failed because the demand for cocaine remained high and a "balloon effect" followed, wherein eradication in one region simply led new plantations to appear in others. Overall, this contributed to more economic pressure on Peru and increasing internal tensions (28).

In 1990, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori adopted a neoliberal economic model to lower inflation, reduce deficits, and reintegrate Peru into the international system that would meet US demands, but tactics only further oppressed peasants and widened the inequality gap. Despite its domestic failure, the reforms legitimised Fujimori in the eyes of the US (Ochoa 2012, 66). Eradication efforts, which resulted in alternative development programs and the adoption of neoliberal policies, were more concerned with appeasing US demands to continue receiving aid. Meanwhile, such policies only worsened the domestic situation in Peru. Despite receiving foreign aid, which was a guise to intimidate Peru and assert US will in the region, eradication and development efforts failed to produce sufficient relief plans, ultimately leaving campesinos with no

source of income. The US-recommended neoliberal and individuated policies, pursued by President Fujimori, failed to provide a safety net for peasants to fall back on, and inevitably led to economic turmoil. To keep the annual \$100 million in US aid and remain certified, Peru upended the country's subsistence-based economy and enacted eradication programs to prove that it was committed to the War on Drugs (Hutchison 2009, 25).

Militarised Civilian Repression and Human Rights Violations

The period between 1980 and 1999 can be characterised by extreme terror. This is demonstrated by a series of human rights violations that were inflicted onto civilians by the Peruvian government under Presidents Alan Garcia and Albert Fujimori. US economic aid was dependent on Peru's acceptance of military intervention, whether this was through training Peruvian armed forces or bringing in the American army (Americas Watch 1992, 125). Peasants were concurrently targeted by four groups: drug traffickers, Sendero Luminoso, the police, and the military (130). In the mid-1980s, Sendero Luminoso, a subversive and revolutionary communist group led by Abimael Guzmán, undertook a strategic effort to gain control of Andean territory (Labate 2016, 126). Guerillas linked themselves to peasants so the army would suspect campesinos of ties to leftist insurgencies (126). Consequently, the army and police began to violently repress campesinos and Sendero Luminoso was able to mobilise campesinos by offering them protection (130). This not only spurred violence, but also created the illusion that coca growers and Sendero Luminoso were connected. The US government declared a war on both "Drugs and National Security" that included growers and Sendero (24). Following this connection, the US became increasingly concerned about the status of Peru, which prompted the Peruvian government to introduce restrictive policies to appease US concerns. Such a move once again placed US ambitions above upholding citizens' human rights.

An atmosphere of violence subsequently emerged in 1991. An average of seven Peruvians died per day from political brutalities; in June alone, 1,584 civilians were killed while 230 were reported as unsolved disappearances (Americas Watch 1992, 12). Half of the respective numbers were peasants (17). In one case, which emphasises the ad hoc nature of the abuses, police heard faint snipers from a base near Nueva Union and subsequently imprisoned twelve young campesinos who were nearby without a just judicial process. The police involved were neither

charged nor reprimanded for these blatant human rights violations (93).

Most of this violence was administered by Peruvian armed forces who faced pressing orders from the US to repress coca farmers and leftist insurgencies; such pressure was directly related to the pending ratification of a free-trade agreement. In response to Fujimori's suspension of democratic rights, Secretary Aronson explained in a 1992 congressional statement: "I intended at that time to tell President Fujimori that Peru would soon be eligible for trade benefits ... when President Fujimori took the actions he did, he made it impossible to pursue that agenda" (Committee on Foreign Affairs 1992, 9). Though this breach of democratic rights was corrupt in itself, it was precipitated by the US demand for Fujimori to enact a neoliberal political rationality in Peru and take a more aggressive approach with coca growers and guerillas. The US, as the leader of the free world, had no choice but to criticize this decision despite simultaneously undertaking similar initiatives with wider-ranging physical abuses in Peru, including the use of herbicides.

In a particularly brutal form of eradication, the US resorted to herbicides as a more efficient means to destroy coca crops. In a covert, unreported field test in the mid-1980s, it sprayed pesticides from a plane. The trial killed both animals and crops, while introducing a fungal infestation known as *Fusarium oxysporum* (Hutchison 2009, 16). Following this operation, these fields became unviable, which ultimately undermined the alternative crop initiative. Aside from food production, the fungal infestation has also been linked to illness in the region, most notably producing a variety of skin infections (17).

The Peruvian government was divided on the use of herbicides; however, after debate, President Alan Garcia accepted an official eradication program just weeks before US aid to Peru was to be renegotiated in Congress (McClintock 1988, 136). Garcia knew that to continue receiving aid, he had to be wholly committed to the War on Drugs and appease any US requests. The danger of herbicide usage in Peru was verified when a production company, Ely Lilly, refused to sell it in the US on a larger scale because it feared damage to civilians and the environment (133). The Peruvian government's consent to the herbicide plan and the strategic timing of its acceptance reflects the powerful pressure that the US placed on Peru, as any deviance from such demands would have risked decertification. The intensity of this economic threat is telling, as President Garcia risked the health of Peruvians and thus created grounds for potential human rights investigations, all of which would have garnered international media attention.

A Perpetual State of Distrust

The undermining of livelihoods and large-scale human rights violations linked to the War on Drugs ultimately isolated and alienated Peruvian peasants. Such tactics fostered a consensus that the government was untrustworthy. Despite externally promoting democracy in the region, the US and its tactics ironically forced Peru into a suspension of democratic rights, which caused the 1980 democratic transition to fail. In a 1998 survey of Peruvian citizens—conducted after a decade of terror—the following data was recorded: forty-nine percent of citizens said that they did not support Peru’s political institutions; 67 percent of voters believed that there was electoral fraud; and Peruvian trust rates in armed forces, the Judicial Branch, Congress, and political parties were significantly lower than in any other Latin American country (Carrion 1999, 43, 59, 60). In addition, there was a belief that the government did not provide sufficient security: one third of respondents reported that they were victims of assault in the twelve months preceding the survey (138). Lastly, most Indigenous peoples reported that they did not see value in politics because of repression and social unrest (Parades 2008, 25).

Part of this distrust stemmed from a series of government-inflicted attacks around 1990 that produced extremely high death rates in the Huallaga. In one instance, 686 civilians in Ayacucho were killed by the Peruvian army in a helicopter attack (Americas Watch 1992, 98). Campesinos tried to protest these abuses, but the suspension of democratic rights, most notably the right to protest, seriously limited their capabilities. Not only were government attacks frequently blamed on Sendero Luminoso and other leftist insurgencies, but it later became apparent that the army was “camouflaging” dead bodies in rivers, and thus the number of deaths was considerably higher than recorded (98). At this point, the CIA was providing the Peruvian army with training on both counterinsurgency strategies as well as how to destroy coca leaves to meet US requirements for both financial aid and incorporation into the international sphere. The monumental distrust among civilians arose from a series of lies and covert operations, which utilised significant amounts of US intelligence and were geared towards advancing the American War on Drugs.

After being pushed to the fringes of society by repressive policies and inattentive governments that were more concerned with international demands than domestic realities, many campesinos were driven to support the leftist insurgency group, Sendero Luminoso. Joint efforts by the Peruvian government and US forces targeted peasants associated

with leftist guerilla insurgencies, further isolating these already desperate groups and thus magnifying government distrust. Ultimately, it was the War on Drugs and Peru's compliance with US eradication efforts that created this regional uprising. An alliance of convenience was created, which perpetuated the cycle of militarised attack on peasants, and in turn, created low confidence in government institutions.

On April 5 of 1992, President Fujimori declared a state of emergency in Peru (Youngers 2000, 7). He dissolved Congress, suspended constitutional guarantees, increased the power of the military, and dismissed the Supreme Court to rule based on presidential decrees (Wise 1994, 75). He inhibited democracy in an attempt to gain control over the coca industry and guerilla organisations, with the aim of integrating Peru into the global economy (116). The US publicly criticised this and threatened to renounce aid, despite that Fujimori's decision was arguably done in an effort to meet the demands of the US in the War on Drugs and demolish the coca leaf industry to US standards. Citizens lost their legal rights, including the right to due process and legal defense, and civilian courts were enacted to try the accused of terrorism and treason (Youngers 2000, 7). The policy of impunity, which had been used under President Garcia, was resurrected through an amnesty law, which granted legal exemptions to any member of the armed forces who had committed human rights abuses (7). This pardoned many abusers without any penalty, including members of the police force who killed approximately thirty peasants in Huallaga Valley in a singular altercation in May of 1988 (Americas Watch 1992, 17). The consistent repression of Peruvians in accordance with economic pressures from the War on Drugs created a disorderly society with no confidence in political institutions, thereby inhibiting Peru's democratic transition.

Aftermath (Post-1999)

The United States framed their time in Peru as a period of economic growth. The 1992 Congressional Report claimed that "with our help and the help of Japan, Peru has begun to normalise its relations with the multilateral development banks" (Committee on Foreign Affairs 1992, 8). Though US financial pressure strengthened sectors of the Peruvian economy and led to certain indisputable empirical benefits, such as the 2006 United States-Peru Free Trade Agreement, this restrictive, mainly upper-class growth also brought long-term government distrust (Labate 2016). The latest data available, indicated in the 2009 Latinobarómetro report, demonstrates the long-term outcomes of this repression: 65 percent of Peruvians are dissatisfied with Peruvian democracy, 55

percent feel unsafe in their neighborhoods; and only seven percent say that public institutions function efficiently (Carrion 2009, 38). Indigenous peoples in the Andean highlands were left with the highest levels of poverty (37). Alternatively, the US government viewed their endeavours as successful, adhering to the neoliberal thought that if the general economy prospered, society was improved. This markedly Westernized approach is riddled with modernisation theory ideals, which insinuate that if a developing country follows the same path of a developed one, they too can gain prosperity. This ultimately alienated a large class of society and did not account for the distinct experience of Peru as a subsistence-based coca society. The economic growth observed due to relentless US intimidation and manipulation in the War on Drugs is heavily outweighed by the countless negative outcomes for the Peruvian masses.

Conclusion

The US War on Drugs placed a devastating economic pressure on Peru that resulted in the destruction of coca crops, horrific human rights abuses justified on anti-drug grounds, and a confidence gap between the government and society. Peru had no choice but to abide by US demands to guarantee the continuation of necessary financial backing and support. Through economic coercion, the US influenced domestic policy, resulting in significant domestic abuses and mass suffering that most notably affected Andean coca farmers.

The Peruvian experience falls within a larger pattern of US intervention in Latin American countries. At the root of this conflict was the notion that an increased circulation of narcotics on US soil could be traced back to coca leaf farmers of the Upper Huallaga Valley region. In the wider context of the Cold War and the fight against communism, specifically the perceived threat from the leftist Sendero Luminoso, the US inflicted terror across Peru that targeted peasants believed to be aligned with leftist insurgencies. In specifically targeting these leftist insurgents, the US War on Drugs became less a question of drug circulation, but rather a larger political and ideological concern. In an official update on the War on Drugs, Congress proclaimed: “We want to see a democratic solution to this problem, and we want to see a restoration of democracy” (Committee on Foreign Affairs 1992, 10). Using mass force and arbitrary killings of civilians, this aggressive effort to suppress communism and leftist insurgencies in Peru manifested in the name of propagating a system of Western democracy, ultimately begging the question: How far will a supposedly democratic country go to impose its own beliefs and

values on another country? Such a forceful spread of democracy appears to be undemocratic in nature, especially considering how the imposition of these beliefs and values resulted in massive amounts of suffering and destruction for the majority of Peruvians.

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