The Phony Drug War: How the US Government Deals Drugs
By Cotey Paterson

Allegations of the US government’s involvement in the drug trade have often been labeled ‘conspiracy theories’, despite being reported by award-winning journalists and academics who investigated the claims, as well as former DEA, CIA, military, and police who witnessed, oversaw, or took part in the crimes. The government’s ability and willingness to spy on people globally was similarly considered a ‘conspiracy theory’ until Edward Snowden recently disclosed this violation to the world. Also like current whistleblowers, including Snowden and Bradley Manning, who are humiliated by the press and, in Manning’s case, tortured in a US prison before being convicted of 19 charges (including five violations of the Espionage Act) (Roshan, 2013), courageous individuals who speak out about the US government’s role in smuggling drugs and supporting drug lords are largely ridiculed and ignored. This so-called conspiracy theory has been discussed and documented for decades, yet the phony drug war persists.

In 1993, Robert Bonner, former head of the DEA, told CBS News the CIA imports drugs into the United States. As a response to Bonner’s admission, Frederick Hitz, the CIA’s Inspector General, told a congressional committee that the CIA has a history of working with drug dealers. In fact, Hitz said the agency secured a waiver from the Department of Justice in the 1980s allowing them to conduct drug smuggling activities (Gibson, 2012).

According to Alfred McCoy (2003), historian and author, the US government’s management of the drug trade can be traced to World War II. He claims the CIA and other intelligence agencies facilitated in the establishment of new hubs for opium production, heroin refining, and drug distribution in Southeast Asia after the suppression of the American and Turkish heroin trades. This Asian heroin haven became known as the Golden Triangle. McCoy says "American involvement in the worldwide drug trade ‘had gone far beyond coincidental complicity; embassies had covered up involvement by client governments, CIA contract airlines had carried opium, and individual CIA agents had winked at the opium traffic. As an indirect consequence of American involvement in the Golden Triangle until 1972, opium production steadily increased ... Southeast Asia’s Golden Triangle grew 70 per cent of the world's illicit opium, supplied an estimated 30 per cent of America's heroin, and was capable of supplying the United States with unlimited quantities of heroin for generations to come” (p. 383). He claims the CIA does not typically handle drugs, however; instead, they provide transport, arms, and political protection to drug lord allies (McCoy, 2003).

More famously, in 1986, the Iran-Contra Affair revealed that CIA and contra forces smuggled drugs and weapons to fund combat operations. Once the drugs were in the United States, the US government propped up drug dealers, like Ricky Ross (aka “Freeway Rick”), a Southern California dealer, to sell the goods. Ross was running a massive operation the Los Angeles Times called "the Wal-Mart of crack dealing" (Grim, 2011).

In 1996, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Gary Webb wrote, "For the better part of a decade, a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency ..."
The US government’s control of the drug trade is also apparent in Afghanistan where, according to the United Nations Drug Control Programme, opium cultivation increased 657% in 2002, which was shortly after the NATO occupation began (Mukarji, 2003). Afghanistan is currently the largest opium producer accounting for 75 per cent of the world’s heroin supply last year (Nordland, 2013). Nearly 900 tons of opium and 375 tons of heroin are trafficked from Afghanistan annually. Moreover, the number of people dying from heroin overdoses in NATO countries is higher than the number of their soldiers killed in Afghanistan, which does not stop US military members from guarding the opium fields (Sites, 2013).

Last year, a spokesman for the Chihuahua state government in Mexico told Al Jazeera the US government does not fight drug traffickers but merely manages the drug trade. His comment came after the fast and furious scandal where the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) provided Mexican drug gangs with 1,700 guns, including the AK-47 used in 2010 to kill Brian Terry, an American Customs and Border Protection Agent. During his trial, Jesús Zambada Niebla, a leading smuggler from the Sinaloa cartel, Mexico’s oldest and most powerful trafficking organisation, said he was working for the DEA and was promised immunity from prosecution. "Under that agreement, the Sinaloa Cartel under the leadership of [Jesus Zambada's] father, Ismael Zambada and 'Chapo' Guzmán were given carte blanche to continue to smuggle tonnes of illicit drugs... into... the United States, and were protected by the United States government from arrest and prosecution in return for providing information against rival cartels," Zambada's lawyers wrote as part of his defence. "Indeed, the Unites States government agents aided the leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel" (Arsenault, 2012).

Furthermore, in 2004, the Sinaloa Cartel was found to be laundering money through one of the US’s largest banks, Wachovia, which is now part of Wells Fargo. In 2010, the bank settled in court, paying $110 million in forfeiture for allowing transactions connected to drug smuggling and $50 million for failing to monitor funds used to traffic 22 tons of cocaine. More importantly, Wachovia failed to apply proper anti-laundering regulations to $378.4 billion transferred to Mexican accounts. In the end, the total fine was less than two per cent of the bank’s $12.3 billion profits in 2009. Jeffrey Sloman, the federal prosecutor, said "Wachovia’s blatant disregard for our banking laws gave international cocaine cartels a virtual carte blanche to finance their operations". Wells Fargo stock increased one per cent on the week of the court settlement (Vulliamy, 2011).

Governments and corporations continue to run wild, disregarding the law and democracy globally, yet most people do not care. According to Shane & Thompson (2010), the DEA currently has 87 offices in 63 different countries and close partnerships with governments that “keep the CIA at arm’s length”. It seems the powers that be have no intention of letting popular opinion about drugs, especially cannabis, get in the way of their profitable global schemes.
References
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