

Why Mexico's drug program works

A State Dept. officer discusses paraquat and Mexico's antidrug effort

Les Alexander, a U.S. State Department program officer in the Office of International Narcotics Control, discussed Mexico's controversial drug eradication program, using paraquat and other herbicides and pesticides with Executive Intelligence Review's Laurence Hecht, in a revealing and wide-ranging telephone interview Sept. 4. As we reported in our last issue, the highly effective Mexican program is under heavy fire — incredibly from Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill), as well as the U.S. marijuana users' organization NORML and High Times magazine, for causing alleged health hazards to young U.S. drug users. And it is looked upon with disfavor by World Bank and IMF officials who see marijuana as a valuable, cash-producing export crop for Third World countries, just as the British promoted opium exports from Crown Colonies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Excerpts from the interview follow.

Q. I understand that as a result of an eradication program, Mexican heroin supply in the United States has dropped from 85 to 90 percent in the '74-'75 period to around 50 or 60 percent or less at this time. Is that program continuing?

A. Yes it is. We're continuing to support the Mexican eradication campaign. We've provided them in this fiscal year which will end on Sept. 30, about \$18 million. Next year we have programmed to give them roughly \$13 million worth of commodities and assistance.

Q. You mentioned that planes and ground-support were used in the battle against the drugs. Was the number of arrests as a result of this up significantly in Mexico?

A. Yes. The Office of the Mexican Attorney General has moved very, very strongly against traffickers and very, very strongly against corrupt elements within the government of Mexico, specifically against government agents, police agents, who are suspected of collaborating with traffickers.

Q. This program started under the Echeverria government, didn't it?

A. Yes it did—well you say "the program," in other words, our program, our beginning to cooperate with the Mexican government. The Mexicans have been

attempting for 30 years or so to eradicate narcotic crops.

Q. Right. But they invited the U.S. to come in on this, back in 1974?

A. Well we started our cooperative program in 1975. The Drug Enforcement Administration of course has maintained liaison with the Mexican government for many years prior, in fact prior to our program.

Q: By "we," you mean the State Department?

A. Yes. The Narcotics Control Program, which was funded after the Foreign Assistance Act commenced in 1975.

Q. You had said earlier that there were not really any political problems with the Mexican government because they had invited the U.S. in there under this 1961 Treaty.

A. Well, no. It wasn't that they invited them in under the Treaty, but they were signatories to the UN Convention on Drugs of 1961, of which we are also signatories, and they felt that they had an international obligation as well as a social and domestic obligation to eradicate narcotic crops.

When the French-Turkish connection was broken up in 1973, Mexico became the principal source of U.S.-bound narcotics. And it was about that time the Mexicans realized that they would not be able to cope with the surge of drug cultivation in Mexico without assistance from us, so they came to us and said, "We're willing to try to bring the narcotics problem in Mexico down to manageable levels and we would very much appreciate your cooperation and assistance."...

The Mexicans do spend substantially more money than we give them. They spend much, much more. It seems to be the impression in this country that we fund the entire program lock, stock, and barrel, which is not true. Again this year, we had programmed roughly \$16 or \$16.5 million, I think when it's all over and done with by the end of the fiscal year we will have spent around \$16 million. Well, the Mexicans, we estimate, will spend well over \$40 million of their own money this year. So again for every one dollar we put up, they put up at least two....

Q. The Percy Amendment... at least in the form that it

finally went through the Joint Congressional Committee, requires that paraquat only be used in conjunction with dyes or perfumes that would enable a person to identify it after it was sprayed.... How would it affect the paraquat program?

A. Well the Mexicans have already gone ahead and begun testing coloring additives. They have identified one which seems to have potential—Rhodamin-B which is a reddish dye. And the U.S. government has provided to the government of Mexico a list of other additives, roughly 10, which they may consider testing....

Q. As I understand it, both paraquat and 2-4D will eradicate the plant that's already grown. But what about the next year, when it can just be replanted again? How does the program work to actually close the operation down, and get the personnel out of there and so on?...

A. Our program, in other words the funds which we're contributing, doesn't address that. I think what you may have in mind is something like crop substitution. For example, getting the *campesinos* to grow something else for a livelihood. Well that, the Mexicans are seeking, trying to find means to provide a livelihood for people growing these things. Getting them to grow other legal commodities other than narcotics.

But again there is so much work involved in growing a poppy field that once a field is destroyed, it's not easy to grow another one. They have to wait. Moreover, the people doing it have to be financed by someone and it's hoped that if the program is successful enough—they're finding as the months go by that they're discovering fewer and fewer fields, indicating greater and greater success. This is obviously disrupting trafficking patterns....

Q. Magazines like High Times and... Alternativa in Colombia are charging that the use of paraquat is, to quote Alternativa, equivalent to the U.S. napalm program in Vietnam—that it's poisoning the population. They compare the U.S. paraquat program to the war in Vietnam.

A. Well you know the war in Vietnam. People try to compare our actions in Vietnam to many other actions....

As far as the claim that it's destroying the population of Mexico, well, I think we have to keep in mind that the Mexicans have made it quite clear to the United States that they will continue to eradicate narcotic crops with or without United States' assistance. They are doing this principally because they feel that they have an international obligation, not only to us, but to other countries to which Mexican drugs may be bound, and also to their own population. They feel that narcotics in itself is a danger to its population. They want to protect their population from narcotics abuse. I think it doesn't take a PhD in medicine or an MD or a PhD in chemistry or anything

else to realize that heroin abuse in this country is a very tragic, costly problem, and the Mexicans certainly don't want to have, in any shape, form, or fashion, a similar problem in their country.

We are not compelling the Mexicans to do this. We are encouraging them to try to eradicate these narcotics crops because we do know that ultimately most of them wind up in the United States, but again, this is something which they're doing essentially on their own initiative. They have done environmental studies. They have determined that there is no danger to the Mexican population from spraying herbicides. They have done ecological tests, they have examined the water in the areas in which they spray; they find that paraquat does not have a great residual effect, it's easily biodegradable. There appears to be no contamination of the land, water or anything else. So I think the claims that they're destroying the Mexican population are simply unsound. They're not based on fact. Moreover, one of the reasons why the Mexicans chose paraquat was because paraquat had been approved by EPA for use in this country, and it is used in this country, just like any number of herbicides and pesticides. And the U.S. population is getting bigger and healthier and stronger all the time, and a lot of this is a direct consequence of the intelligent application of modern technology, which includes the use of herbicides and pesticides. I mean this doomsday scenario to try to compare these things to napalm—this is childish. It's just in no way related.

Q. But apparently this paraquat scare has affected the program somewhat.

A. Yes there has been criticism of the program from the Congress which is prompted by the fears that American marijuana smokers may be endangering their health. On the other hand there have been no confirmed cases of paraquat-caused illness or death.

Q. There are an awful lot of people who feel that drug smoking, or however you inhale the stuff, is illegal, harmful and immoral and why should we be so concerned about protecting somebody who's committing a crime. If you rob a bank, you might get shot too—it's one of the risks you take.

A. Well this is the position the Mexican government takes. They don't feel that they have a responsibility to protect people against themselves. It's against the law. They've made it illegal to take narcotics in Mexico, and they have done so because they have not been able to satisfy themselves that smoking marijuana or mainlining heroin is good for you. And they take a position that despite warnings of competent health officials in Mexico, if people continue, or decide to take drugs, they do so at their own risk, and they don't feel that they have a responsibility to protect those people against themselves. In the United States, we haven't taken that position—obviously.