

Brawl in Washington over drug policy

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On May 1, 1994, the U.S. government abruptly cancelled its policy of providing the governments of Colombia and Peru with radar reconnaissance data from the high-technology AWACS monitoring system that has been crucial in their efforts to track and interdict illegal narcotics flights. The action elicited cheers from the drug legalization lobby, and a flurry of protests from Ibero-American governments and anti-drug officials of the Clinton administration.

Equally abruptly, one month later, the administration announced that it was considering a new Executive Order that would not only restore the data collaboration, but would for the first time permit Ibero-American military and police to use the intelligence to shoot down civilian aircraft that were clearly engaged in drug smuggling. Sen. John Kerry (D-Ma.) has introduced legislation authorizing the use of the surveillance data to shoot drug-running aircraft.

In an effort to underscore the administration's ongoing commitment to the drug war, a parade of officials appeared on June 22 before joint hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights and the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, to reinforce the push to restore the AWACS data collaboration and pre-empt any appearance of abandonment of the counter-narcotics collaboration.

White House drug policy adviser Brown read a statement into the record which began: "I am announcing today that the administration will ask the Congress to enact legislation that would permit the President to waive existing criminal code provisions on acts of violence against civilian aircraft if the President determines that a country faces a national security threat from the trafficking in illicit drugs and that the country has appropriate procedures in place to protect innocent aircraft. . . . The temporary suspension of sharing certain types of information with the governments of Colombia and Peru is not reflective of any desire to change this administration's policy of giving full support to the democracies in Latin America in our mutual fight against illegal narcotics smuggling."

Brown explained that an interagency review of the U.S. policy had led to the temporary suspension of the data sharing, and had also produced the decision, announced at the hearings, that the President would seek a "narrow change" in the law to permit the renewal of the intelligence cooperation

on a firmer legal basis.

If these contradictory events seem to suggest policy confusion in Washington over the crucial issue of the Clinton administration's anti-drug effort, the perception is accurate. In the absence of a clear, top-down elaborated strategy for conducting a war on drugs, the Clinton administration, like many other governments throughout the hemisphere, has become embroiled in an heated behind-the-scenes battle over the proper direction to take in combatting the growing menace of illegal drugs.

The policy debate, here and in many Ibero-American capitals, has been colored by an aggressive drive by the dope cartel and its allies to push for a total surrender in the war on drugs: legalization.

The policy battle was first brought home last year, when Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders made an off-the-cuff statement that she favored a study of the possible benefits of drug decriminalization. Both the President and his drug policy adviser immediately issued statements categorically rejecting the Elders idea, but the Drug Policy Foundation and other pro-legalization advocacy groups jumped on the Elders call and have been attempting to peddle it ever since as a sign that the Clinton White House is actually unenthusiastic about the counter-narcotics program.

As recently as July 7, Lee Brown again had to come out in an interview with the *Washington Times*, reiterating that "We do not intend to spend one nickel to study [legalization] because we know the problems of drugs: They bring about misery and despair, and all too often, death."

In the same interview, however, Brown admitted that President Clinton had made a "mistake" in allowing drastic cutbacks in the budget and personnel of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. And, although the fiscal 1993 drug war budget reached an all-time high of over \$12 billion, critical Pentagon anti-drug programs, beyond just the AWACS data sharing, were shut down because they were accomplishing too little.

The one-worlders

Inside the administration, there are voices beyond Elders's that are pro-legalization. Richard Feinberg, former director of the openly pro-legalization Inter-American Dialogue, is the chief National Security Council staffer for Latin America. What's more, there are other officials at the State Department and elsewhere who, while not necessarily hardcore advocates of legalization, do favor the stripping down of national sovereignty in favor of increased involvement by the United Nations and the Organization of American States in the internal affairs of the hemisphere. Those one-worlders oppose the kind of close counter-narcotics cooperation between the U.S. and Ibero-American governments, because such efforts naturally strengthen the national militaries and police forces, thereby strengthening some of the core institutions of national sovereignty.