American-Peruvian Relations (1980-2000): The War on Drugs and the Complex Nature of Reaganian Rhetoric

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This essay will attempt to navigate American-Peruvian relations in respect to the War on Drugs from 1980 to 2000. It will be argued that the rhetoric of a “war” on “drugs”, as stated by American President Ronald Reagan in 1981, was misleading as it seemed to suggest a battle between two forces; namely those opposed to, and those in favour of, drug use, drug trafficking, drug production, etc. In reality, however, the drug trade was, as it is now, complex. Issues of culture, national identity and government, married with aspects of foreign policy, international development, and global economics were/are a few of the many variables contributing to this complexity. As such, this paper will reveal that any attempt to sort people (including presidents, farmers and terrorists) and governments into clearly defined categories related to their position on drugs is merely a façade.

This essay will attempt to navigate American-Peruvian relations with respect to the War on Drugs - specifically the growing of coca leaves - from 1980 to 2000. It will be argued that the rhetoric of a “war” on “drugs”, as stated by American President Ronald Reagan in 1981, was misleading as it seemed to suggest a battle between two forces; namely those opposed to, and those in favour of, drug use, drug trafficking, drug production, etc. In reality, however, the drug trade was complex. Issues of culture, national identity and government, married with aspects of foreign policy, international development, and global economics were a few of the many variables contributing to this complexity. As such, this paper will reveal that any attempt to sort individuals and governments into clearly defined categories related to their position on drugs is merely a façade. All actors in the War on Drugs found themselves in a tension between Reagan’s purported evil, those “for” drugs, and good, those “against” drugs.

Part I: The 1980’s
The stage for the War on Drugs was set in July 1979 at “a hearing before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse”. Chairperson Tennyson Guyer announced that “[t]he availability, abuse, and popularity of cocaine in the United States [had] reached pandemic proportions”.\(^1\) Though Mr. Guyer’s language was strong, with approximately 15% of the population having reported cocaine use in 1979\(^2\) and 19 metric tons of the drug entering into the United States in the previous year,\(^3\) his language was justified. However, attempts to deter and eradicate the substance’s presence in America did not become a national priority until 1981, when President Ronald Reagan commenced the “War on Drugs”. This so called war was a federal attempt to rid the nation of cocaine, deemed the “white plague”.\(^4\) Needless to say, there were many perspectives on how to affectively succeed in this “crusade”.\(^5\) Fundamentally, the War on Drugs was about being, in the words of (then) First Lady Nancy Reagan, “smarter and stronger and tougher than [the ingenious drug criminals].”\(^6\) Mrs. Reagan’s speech employs an “us” versus “them” mentality: “us” representative of those “against” drugs and “them” representative of those “for” drugs. It is important to note that these categorizations were broad and undefined.

Partnership with governments of drug producing countries, in the form of military aid,\(^7\) was one of the primary ways that Reagan desired to fight the “war for [American] Freedom [against drug use].”\(^8\) Naturally, Peru, home


\(^{3}\) Dreyfus, 375.


\(^{6}\) Ronald and Nancy Reagan.


\(^{8}\) Hawdon, 429.
to one of “the world’s most fertile coca-growing regions in the world”\(^9\) and producer of approximately 30\%-50\% of the cocaine which entered America\(^10\) was a strategic “battleground”. However, in the 1980’s, American-Peruvian relations were strained as Peruvian President Alan Garcia Perez vocalized opposition to the IMF and other forms of neo-imperialism. Interestingly, Garcia was willing to cooperate with American anti-drug efforts. Rex Hudson in *Peru: A Country Study* purports, “Garcia’s willingness to collaborate, at least rhetorically, on the drug issue...helped ameliorate relations.”\(^{11}\) In other words, Garcia’s support was motivated by political opportunism; that is, attempting to reconcile with the United States to make diplomatic relations pleasant. His words were accepted, which seemingly positioned him as an anti-drug president. That said, previous statements made by the Peruvian president may appear to suggest otherwise as Garcia stated “several coca-based dishes have been served at the Government Palace” and coca has “good nutritional value.”\(^{12}\) In reality, these quotes do not support the notion that Garcia was a proponent of drugs. Rather, they emphasize the need for an important differentiation in the discussion of the War on Drugs: coca is not cocaine. Ashley Day Drummond asserts that “there is less than 1 percent cocaine alkaloid in a coca leaf.”\(^{13}\) Though coca undeniably contributes to the production of cocaine, it is not the harmful substance purportedly fought against in the War on Drugs. Drummond in turn declares that “[coca has] carried a stigma as a result of the harms caused by cocaine.”\(^{14}\) This stigma was carried to the highest levels of the United States government in the 1980s and 1990s as policies were passed which called for the destruction of thousands of hectares of coca crop in Peru. The implications of coca destruction will be

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\(^{10}\) McClintock, working, 39.

\(^{11}\) Ashley Day Drummond. “Peru: Coca, Cocaine, and the International Regime Against Drugs” *Law and Business Review of the Americans* 14.1; pg. 107-139.

\(^{12}\) Drummond, 12.

\(^{13}\) Drummond, 7.

\(^{14}\) Drummond, 6.
explored at a later point in this paper.

Regardless of Garcia’s personal view on the use of coca and his nominal support for the American led “war”, one must question whether the views of the president were truly representative of the government’s convictions. In other words, can one categorize the position of a government as supportive/not supportive of a policy simply because the official leader is/is not? This question was as salient in the United States as it was in Peru as President George H. W. Bush desired to send more aid to Peru in the 1980s to combat a terrorist organization involved in coca cultivation. However,

[he was] opposed by congress as many Congress [people] believed that the Peruvian military was engaged in a persistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights. Accordingly, U.S. aid to the Peruvian military...was minimal, [averaging $4 million annually between 1980 and 1990.]

To be sure, the quote above does not address the reality that the American government did support, to a greater degree, a branch of the Peruvian military that was labeled anti-narcotic. Yet, the fact is that the leader of the country was adamant in his position of fighting drugs, but one of the policies to carry his goal out (that is significantly funding the Peruvian military), was not agreed upon by the governing body. Thus, the first complexity of Reagan’s rhetoric is exposed: when a government leader classifies a policy as anti-drug (or “good”) but is not supported by the governmental structure, the country seemingly occupies a dualistic role as lack of support for a “good” policy is deductively bad/“evil”. That said, the United States Congress was justified in their hesitation to fund the Peruvian military as Pablo G. Dreyfus contends that “there was a spread of corruption in the armed forces, including collusion between drug traffickers and military commanders...” Inferentially, because the United States was funding the military (even if it was significantly less than the president would have desired), they were, unintentionally, supporting drug traffickers in Peru. It is then apparent that a close examination of the

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15 McClintock, working, 23.  
16 Dreyfus, 371.
American position towards drugs is both “good” and “evil” according to the simplistic rhetorical constructs of Reagan’s War on Drugs.

The aforementioned stigma attached to coca was also likely an American construction as “Washington favored eradication of...coca plants.” This policy apparently failed to acknowledge that the plant is not intrinsically the problem. Moreover, Washington’s desires did not take into account that coca in Peru is inextricably linked to cultural identity and history. In fact, “archaeological findings show that coca has been used in Peru for over 4,000 years.” Therefore, American attempts to eradicate the plant were problematic in light of Peruvian culture. Subsequently, opposition to coca destruction, as protested by the Peruvian government, should not be directly connoted as Peruvian desire to produce drugs. This is not to suggest that all individuals and groups who supported coca leaf production and cultivation were motivated by cultural reasons; for some it was simply a means of subsistence. Thus, an international development model which reduced coca prices and offered alternative crops would have been a solution palatable to both Peruvian farmers (who needed to sell crops to survive) and the American government (who, perhaps ignorantly, desired complete coca eradication).

Farmers were not the only group interested in making money through coca cultivation. Another group with a similar interest was the Shining Path, or Sendero Luminoso (S.L.). They wanted a monopoly on coca growing in Peru’s Upper Huallaga Valley in order to fund their organization; the S.L. desired “to carry out protracted...revolutionary warfare with the aim of overthrowing the government...and changing the social and economic system [of Peru].” Essentially, they were a terrorist organization funded by coca production. Though this may seem like “the ingenious drug criminals” Nancy Reagan spoke of, perhaps, like the farmers, the S.L. would accept a crop replacement which reaped the same profit; coca was not a necessity, money was. (These two

17 McClintock, 39.
18 Drummond, 8.
19 McClintock, 132.
20 This was the group President Reagan wanted to defeat by sending more money to the Peruvian military which congress declined in the 1980’s.
21 Dreyfus, 378.
groups illustrate one of many ways in which international development could mitigate a response to the drug trade.) Nevertheless, the Americans opted for crop destruction and only a “small fraction” of money given to Peru went to alternative crop development.\textsuperscript{22} It is also important to note that in the case of both the farmers and the S.L., it is likely that the coca they produced was bought by an intermediary; that is to say, neither group directly transported coca, or cocaine, to the United States. Arguably then, they are not directly profiting off drug production, but rather the individuals to whom they sell their crop. As such, coca cultivators, both legitimate and rogue, demonstrate that it is extremely difficult to cast individuals as “for” or “against” anti-drug efforts as their actions are not explicitly for the production of drugs (classified as “good”), though there is little doubt their actions are vital in the production of cocaine (which Reagan spoke of as “evil”). This may seem contradictory, but it is not. The nuance rather emphasizes the complexity of the War on Drugs and shows how the actors involved played a dualistic role.

\textit{Part II: The 1990s}

Similar to the previous decade, American-Peruvian relations were generally pleasant, though strained, in the early 1990’s. However, the issues which were previously contentious were now agreed upon, and the issues which were agreed upon were now contentious. The United States liked the economic policies of the new Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori (elected in 1990);\textsuperscript{23} but they did not appreciate his drug policy. Unlike his predecessor, who supported American eradication of coca, “under Fujimori relations were... strained because [he] was reluctant to sign an accord that would increase United States...efforts in eradicating coca fields.”\textsuperscript{24} His hesitancy may suggest that Peru no longer supported American efforts to combat the “white plague.” Yet, in reality, Lima simply “advocated crop substitution and alternative development programs, which would be [widely accepted amongst] Peru’s


\textsuperscript{23}McClintock

\textsuperscript{24}Hudson
approximately 200,000 coca farmers." [25] In other words, Fujimori’s policies were representative of the considerable cultural and economic significance of coca in Peru, as discussed previously. Succinctly, the War on Drugs in the initial years of the 1990’s (were as complicated as the 1980s and) lend credence to the argument that a notion of “for” and “against” drugs is fallaciously simple and as such all parties involved are in tension between the two polarities.

When Bill Clinton was elected as the president of the United States in 1993 the tension was further exacerbated. Initially, President Clinton made it clear that Latin America, and in turn the War on Drugs, were not priorities for his government. Raphael F. Perl outlines two primary reasons to support this claim. First, Clinton placed narcotics control at parity with other international goals and foreign policy. This reprioritized and devalued the “war’s” significance as a pertinent policy. [26] Second, and most importantly, in 1994 under Clinton, congress cut spending to the United States Department of International Narcotics Control by 30%. [27] Additionally, 1994 witnessed the implementation of NAFTA. Although President Bush had signed the document in 1992, President Clinton was in power and was responsible for handling the pragmatic ramifications thereof. It has been noted by economic historians that there is “an inverse relationship between liberal trade and rigid drug control.” [28] Essentially, NAFTA provided a mechanism through which illicit activities were furthered. They were undetected because “70% of cocaine [was] shipped via-maritime trade, disguised as legitimate trade.” [29] Hence, United States (again) supported the drug trade through an international economic policy similar to the time when congress unintentionally supported the drug trade by funding the Peruvian military. Of course it would not be reasonable to suggest that President Clinton or former President Bush were explicitly “for” drugs; yet it is clear that some of their policies have ramifications which may lead one to believe otherwise. This is not to suggest that the latter analysis is necessarily

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[27] Perl, 38.
[29] Drummond, 21.
correct, but it does affirm the complexity of classifying individuals, in this case governments, as either “for” or “against” the War on Drugs. Like others examined in this paper both Clinton and Bush navigated a tension between the two extremes outline by Reagan.

Adding to the complexity, in 1997 a drastic shift occurred in the American government’s policy. President Clinton stated in the second year of his second term that “Latin American issues [would] come to the fore.” And with respect to the War on Drugs they did. Peru was characteristic of this change. President Clinton increased funding to the country annually until Peru received 80 million dollars by 2000.\textsuperscript{30} Evidently, this maneuver was in stark contrast to the President’s past funding cuts and neglect of Latin America. This policy change demonstrates that President Clinton is emblematic of the multifaceted nature of the War on Drugs as some actions appear to be “for” drugs and others “against”. The ambiguity lies not necessarily with President Clinton, but rather with the simplistic rhetoric used to describe the complex nature of the War on Drugs.

\textit{Conclusion}

This paper has briefly explored American-Peruvian relations from 1980 to 2000 with a specific focus on the War on Drugs. It has been argued that understandings of governmental support, or lack thereof, of Peruvian culture, economic policies (namely, NAFTA) and theories of international development expose the complexities of the American-led anti-narcotics initiative. In turn, these complexities suggest that the Presidential rhetoric of “war” was fallacious as it masqueraded drug policy as a battle between those opposed to, and those in favour of, drug use, drug trafficking and drug production. In reality many individuals, including presidents, farmers, congress, and terrorist groups, represented a plurality of positions in the spectrum of “good” and “evil” created by Reagan’s rhetoric.

Though it is clear that cocaine use in the United States had reached levels of “pandemic proportions” in the late 1970s, this paper has not

\textsuperscript{30} Friesendorf, 17.
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propounded an explanation as to why President Reagan would use such aggressive, and ultimately flawed, language. Perhaps he was unaware of the multifaceted nature of the drug system, or did not appreciate the important difference between coca (cultivation in Peru) and cocaine (consumption in the United States). Conversely, it is conceivable that he was conscious that “war” rhetoric would (incorrectly) polarize those “for” and those “against” drugs, symbiotically creating the mentality of “us” versus “them” - a mentality arguably needed to lend credence to his “crusade”. Regardless of Reagan’s motivation, he was ultimately struggling against a tenuous concept, not a static reality or a clearly defined enemy. The nature of war on a concept reverberates in contemporary American society. “Terror”, left undefined and ambiguous, now dominates the political compass of Washington - temporarily displacing the importance of eradicating “the controllable fire [that is cocaine].”

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* To be sure, not all of these resources were cited in the body of the paper, but they were read during research in preparation of writing.