

Can the borders be sealed?

PETER REUTER

THE RHETORIC of drug policy has changed in the last five years. Political figures, from the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration to local police chiefs, have agreed that enforcement of drug prohibitions has clear limits in its ability to reduce drug use. The call now is for so-called "demand-side" measures, particularly prevention programs. Nonetheless, America continues to commit its resources, if not its spirit, almost entirely to enforcement. In the 1988 fiscal year, 75 percent of the federal "drug-war" budget was devoted to enforcement; total expenditures reached almost \$4 billion. The Senate passed an odd contingency bill (by a resounding ninety-three to zero), allowing the President to spend an additional \$2.6 billion on drug programs in Fiscal Year 1989, if he determines that drugs constitute a "national emergency."¹ Of this \$2.6 billion, most would go to enforcement, with particular emphasis on acquiring sophisticated equipment for interdiction.

This article is drawn from Peter Reuter, Gordon Crawford, and Jonathan Cave, Sealing the Borders (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1988).

¹ The contingency aspect arose from the fact that the bill would have broken the budget ceiling agreed to by Congress and the President. The House did not approve of this ruse, and rejected it by a 412-0 vote. At present it is not clear how the extra money will be found, but there is little doubt that total federal drug expenditures will rise.

This preference for enforcement is not just a federal passion. Expenditures on police enforcement at the state and local levels have been estimated at \$4.4 billion in 1986, the latest year for which an estimate is available. Prosecutors, courts, and prisons may have added another billion or two to that figure. State and local government expenditures on drug prevention and treatment in that same year were only about \$800 million. It is likely that the disproportion has increased since 1986, given public pressure on law-enforcement agencies to intensify their efforts against the visible and violent street markets that characterize so many large cities.

Federal enforcement expenditures go to a variety of programs, ranging from support for more sophisticated prosecutions by state and local agencies to source-country control programs. But the largest single program is for interdiction—that is, the effort to seize drugs and couriers on their way from the source countries (principally Colombia and Mexico) to the United States. In the 1988 fiscal year, interdiction accounted for about \$1.04 billion in federal expenditures, and Congress has been baying for more.

Congress has been particularly eager to have the military shoulder more of the growing interdiction burden; it reasons that the military's \$300 billion annual budget and its enormous arsenal of apparently relevant equipment—from helicopters to sophisticated radar devices to fast ships—should enable it to dramatically reduce the capacity of smugglers to bring drugs across U.S. borders. In late 1986 the House of Representatives passed an amendment that would have required the military services to become the primary interdiction agencies, and to "seal the borders" within forty-five days of passage of the act. The Senate, after a scathing attack on the proposal by Senator Sam Nunn (who argued that it was "the equivalent of passing a law saying the President shall, by Thanksgiving, devise a cure for the common cold") rejected the amendment, but the 1986 Omnibus Drug Control Act did require the military to become much more active in the interdiction effort. Some members still support the view that the military should take on this task. Senator DeConcini, one of the leading drug warriors, has even broached the prospect of using SDI if all else fails in this struggle. In May 1988 the House passed another bill putting more of the burden on the military; ironically, the House proposed shifting \$475 million from SDI development to antidrug efforts.

Yet the recent results of cocaine-interdiction efforts are certainly not encouraging. It is true that as interdiction expenditures have grown (since 1981), the amount of cocaine seized has also grown

dramatically: whereas in 1981 interdictors seized 1.7 tons of cocaine, the total may have been as high as forty tons in 1987. Furthermore, even though total cocaine imports increased rapidly over that same period, a much larger share of shipments to the U.S. was seized in 1987 than in 1981. (The interdiction seizure rate in 1987 may have been as high as one quarter.) Nonetheless, not only did total imports apparently increase, but the price of cocaine, at both the import and retail levels, also fell rapidly. By late 1987 it was asserted that some large shipments of cocaine were selling for only \$15,000 a kilogram in Miami (compared with about \$55,000 a kilogram in 1981). At the retail level, where the kilogram is broken down into one-gram units, the price per kilo fell from about \$600,000 to \$250,000.

The recent past suggests that interdiction, even if it produces a high rate of seizures, will do little to decrease cocaine imports. The Congress, backed by numerous General Accounting Office reports, seems to believe that the problem lies in the execution of the interdiction program—in particular, lack of coordination. There have been public squabbles among the agencies over who has primacy, as well as complaints about a lack of trained personnel and underfunding of operation and maintenance budgets. All this has fed Congress's suspicion that more could be accomplished with the resources currently allocated.

What in fact could an improved and expanded interdiction program do to reduce cocaine consumption in the United States? This is a question that Congress rarely asks. It has occasionally asked the interdiction agencies (notably the Coast Guard and the Customs Services) what they believe is required to "cut off" the flow of drugs. Since both agencies are too sensible to have any faith that they could actually accomplish that, they have answered in appropriately vague ways. The Customs Commissioner has described a program that would require a twenty-five-mile cordon around the United States, with every entering vessel, plane, or vehicle having to submit to inspection before crossing the cordon. Commissioner van Raab correctly assumes that this is not a realistic prospect, and little time has been spent on fleshing out the proposal.

The more serious question is what might be achieved through large increases in the interdiction program, whether invested in military or non-military resources. A recently published RAND study carried out on behalf of the Department of Defense argues that it is extremely difficult to reduce cocaine consumption in this country by even as little as 5 percent through a more stringent inter-

diction program.² The problem lies in the adaptability of smugglers, the variety of methods by which cocaine can be brought into the United States, and the low price of both drugs and labor for smugglers.

Adapting to changing strategies

We know relatively little about the organization of the smuggling business. Those who get caught by interdictors are generally lower-level agents, pilots (who may be highly paid), crewmen on ships, and unloaders. Those who run the smuggling organizations remain fairly shadowy figures, probably residents of the source countries themselves. We cannot say if they are, as press accounts often suggest, peculiarly astute businessmen. They have shown at least a modicum of shrewdness in their adaptation to changes in the strategies of interdictors, however. When, in the early 1980s, the Customs Services improved their radar surveillance of the South Florida Coast—then the primary entry point for both cocaine and marijuana—smugglers changed their methods.

In the case of marijuana, as the Coast Guard increased its efforts against sea-borne traffic into southern Florida, the smugglers shifted to smaller loads. Whereas the average seizure in 1978 was 9 tons, by 1986 it had fallen to 4.6 tons. "Mother ships," carrying fifty to a hundred tons and offloading to smaller, faster boats for the final run to the Florida coast, almost disappeared during this period. The result was an enormous dilution of the efficacy of maritime interdiction. It takes the same resources to interdict a five-ton shipment as to interdict a twenty-ton shipment, particularly since the Coast Guard vessels must generally tow the smuggler back to shore to begin legal proceedings; an arrested person cannot be held for long without the beginnings of formal prosecution. Thus by halving the size of the average shipment, the smugglers practically doubled the task confronting interdiction agencies. Indeed, since smugglers were then able to use smaller boats, the interdictors had to sort through a larger number of potential smuggling vessels.

Similarly, cocaine smugglers shifted much of their traffic to other routes. In particular, there seems to have been a substantial

² Senator DeConcini has questioned the objectivity of this study, in view of the fact that the military has made no bones about its lack of enthusiasm for drug interdiction. As the leader of the RAND project, I can say that no Defense Department official sought to promote a particular conclusion, and that the Department reviewed the report only for factual accuracy; substantive comments came mainly from the interdiction agencies themselves. The report may turn out to be incorrect, but it was certainly objective; it derived from research that was entirely free from sponsor influence.

increase in the amount of cocaine brought in through Mexico. Once in Mexico—and there are few barriers to entry from the south of that country (with or without General Noriega's assistance)—the drugs may be brought across by small plane, private vehicle, or even by boat.

The peculiar problem presented by Mexico is that planes taking off from there may be at risk for only short periods of time. There are numerous landing strips less than thirty miles south of the U.S. border. A small plane can make the trip over the border and drop its load (if need be, without landing) in less than an hour. During this period the U.S. interdictors must not only "see" the plane, but also identify it as a vessel used by smugglers and launch interceptors to catch it. This is not technically impossible, but it is exceedingly difficult. It is particularly difficult when there is no continuous radar coverage along the Mexican border, which has been the case until quite recently.

The number of methods that have been used for bringing in large shipments of cocaine is impressive. Air-cargo bays have been found stuffed with the drug. The U.S. rose-growers' association once tried to bring an action against its Colombian competitors for illegal subsidies in violation of GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), arguing that the cocaine smugglers were subsidizing the shipment of roses for purposes of concealment. The International Trade Commission correctly pointed out that any such subsidy was a private one, hence beyond the reach of the GATT rules.

Other large seizures have involved furniture or other objects stuffed with cocaine, carried in cargo ships, or concealed in trucks, coming over the Mexican border. One ton of cocaine was recently found hidden in a cargo of frozen fruit pulp arriving from Ecuador. Four tons were found in a cargo of Brazilian lumber, following a tip from a Colombian source. Though there are still occasional seizures of modest quantities of cocaine hidden on the persons of airline passengers, the declining cost of the drug is causing smugglers to move toward less labor-intensive smuggling methods. There have been no reports of smuggling over the border in model planes or Remote Pilotless Vehicles, but these are clearly possibilities if the risks associated with other methods increase.

Smugglers have continued to change their methods for bringing cocaine into this country. In 1985, for example, the Coast Guard began seizing significant amounts of cocaine on private boats. Whereas in 1981 the first 100-kilogram seizure attracted considerable attention, the average seizure by the Customs Air Branch in

1986 was 250 kilograms. Even thousand-kilogram seizures barely rate a front-page reference now. Mere expansion of the total size of the cocaine market could not account for this order-of-magnitude increase in the size of shipments. That change reflects some important developments in the cocaine market.

The costs of smuggling

Interdiction affects the consumption of cocaine in the U.S. by affecting its price. No one seriously claims now that interdiction can control the amount of drugs physically able to reach this nation. There are simply too many experienced smugglers, and too many producers and refiners, for that to be feasible. Interdiction might be able to make smuggling costs so high that U.S. consumers would want less (so that less would be delivered); but interdiction could not be so effective that, say, only a hundred tons of cocaine would reach our shores. Thus we need to look at how interdiction raises smugglers' costs and, eventually, the price of cocaine for users.

Smuggling entails four primary costs: drugs, personnel, transportation, and corruption. Not only is each cost currently modest (compared with the retail price of cocaine), but it is hard to see how any of them could be made significantly higher.

Producing drugs is inexpensive. The leaf that goes into making a kilogram of cocaine costs about \$1,000; not much more goes into the refining process. Fully 99 percent of the price of the drug when sold on the streets in the United States is accounted for by payments to people who distribute it.

Seizing drugs close to the source thus imposes little penalty on the drug-distribution system. Drugs are cheaply replaced. A kilo seized on the beaches of Colombia in 1987 probably cost less than \$5,000 to replace, including the cost of getting it from the refinery to the point of export. Even by the time it made it out of Colombia into Mexico or the Bahamas, it probably cost less than \$15,000. These figures are substantially lower than those of 1981.

As a result it seems likely that smugglers will now spend less to protect their drugs. Precautions are expensive. A smuggler whose cocaine costs \$10,000 per kilo will spend more to protect it (for example, by bribing the local sheriff) than a smuggler whose replacement cost is only \$5,000 per kilo. With lower replacement costs, the smuggler may also find it sensible to send larger shipments in a single load. The transportation costs are the same for a 200-kilo shipment in a private plane as for a 100-kilo shipment. The pilot's risk of

long-term imprisonment is also the same. A smuggler who wants to get across two hundred kilograms a month will be more likely to do it in one rather than two shipments when the price of cocaine falls.

Simple arithmetic demonstrates how little the seizure of the drug itself can affect the retail price of cocaine. Assume for the moment that instead of seizing 20 percent of all cocaine shipped from Colombia, the interdiction agencies were able to seize 50 percent. The present retail price is (approximately) \$250,000, which includes compensation for lost drugs. If an additional 30 percent of drugs were seized, the kilo sold in the street would incur an additional \$6,000 in replacement costs (assuming that a kilo costs as much as \$20,000 to replace). Thus our successful drug-seizure program would have added less than 3 percent to the retail price of cocaine.

An analysis of labor costs is even more discouraging. The problem is simply that smugglers of cocaine need very little skilled labor per kilogram. Even if their workers demand high compensation for the risks of long prison terms, it will have little effect on the final price of the drug.

Consider the pilot who flies in 250-kilogram shipments over the Mexican border. A fair guess is that he now receives about \$250,000 for incurring the risks of the business—attempting to land under difficult conditions, and possibly going to prison. Assume that we have much more effective interdiction—that is, that the pilot is more likely to be caught, and that he faces a much longer prison term if caught. The pilot then triples his demands, and will now make the trip only if paid \$750,000, surely a fair down payment on his daydreams of wealth. Unfortunately, this adds only \$2,000 to the per-kilogram cost of bringing cocaine into the U.S., less than 1 percent of the retail price.

The tale is at least as depressing when we consider the other types of labor used by smugglers. Pilots presumably value their freedom rather highly; they have, after all, prospects of reasonable earnings in legitimate positions. The same cannot be said for crewmen on ships coming up from Colombia. Their earnings from other employment may be quite modest, and the rigors of a U.S. federal prison may not appear too daunting when compared with life on a Colombian fishing vessel. They already face at least a one-in-nine chance of being arrested on any marijuana smuggling trip, and the federal judiciary is not lenient in these matters; in South Florida the average 1986 sentence was forty-six months for those caught by the Coast Guard. Nonetheless, crew members are believed (a stronger statement is unfortunately not possible) to earn only about \$15,000

each for taking the trip; the master may get as much as \$25,000. Total crew costs are probably between \$100,000 and \$150,000. Even if better interdiction were to double this cost, it still would add little to the cost of bringing in a kilo of cocaine, assuming that smugglers are willing to put aboard a hundred kilograms at a time.

The reader need not be burdened with details concerning transportation. Adequate vessels and planes are available for \$100,000; defrayed over a 250-kilogram shipment, that amounts to only \$400 per kilogram. Seizing equipment has no more promise than seizing drugs or couriers.

The risks of smuggling

Given these facts, it should come as no surprise to learn that an effort to simulate the effect of increasingly effective interdiction (through a formal mathematical model) found that improved interdiction will have little impact on U.S. cocaine consumption. In the model, interdictors seized increasing quantities of cocaine, even increasing shares of total shipments, but were able to reduce total consumption by more than 5 percent only when they could raise the risks for almost every mode of bringing in the drug. And there lies the rub; it is hard to see how all the many and disparate methods of bringing in this compact drug could be made very risky.

We built a model in which smugglers had to make a choice among different routes for bringing in cocaine. Each route was associated with a particular risk, and with particular transportation/personnel costs. As the interdictors raised risks along a particular route, the smugglers were induced to shift away from that route and to send more of their shipments along alternative routes. Increasing the probability of interdiction raises the smuggler's costs, since he must now face higher drug-replacement, transportation, and labor costs. With little hard data available, assumptions were made that favored the interdictors. For example, we assumed that labor costs were quite sensitive to risk, so that raising the risk of being caught from 0.25 to 0.50 led to a quadrupling of a pilot's payment.

Even with these favorable assumptions, it proved very difficult to raise smugglers' costs enough to greatly increase the retail price of cocaine, and thus reduce total consumption. In the model, smugglers had eleven routes available to them—five by air, five by sea, and one by land. (The land route represents shipment across Mexico.) The interdictors were assumed to be able to raise risks on all of

the routes except the land route, in which the drug is, in effect, walked across the border in small shipments. The probability of a shipment's being intercepted on the land route stayed fixed at 10 percent, but other costs (particularly personnel) were assumed to be relatively high.

When we raised the risk of capture along one route from about one-quarter to one-half, smugglers negated this by shifting to other routes; their costs rose by less than 2 percent, or about \$117 per kilo. It was only when five out of eleven routes were subject to the higher risk that imports fell by more than 10 percent. When the risk was raised on all ten of the non-land routes, smugglers' costs per kilo rose by \$7,663, or about 3 percent of the retail price. Consumption now fell by more than 20 percent. As more routes incurred the higher risk, an increasing share of total shipments were imported via the Mexican land border.

The unintended consequences of drug policy

The astute reader will now have identified a puzzle. Depressing though the above analysis may be, it still suggests that more interdiction, even when smugglers adapt, will raise prices. Yet more intense interdiction since 1981 has been accompanied by declining prices, contrary both to intuition and to the foregoing projections. The explanation may lie in the phenomenon of "learning by doing": most individuals and organizations get better at their job the longer they do it. This is the basis for the famous strategy suggested by the Boston Consulting Group in the early 1970s: "investing in the learning curve."

Our conjecture—and it is no more than that—is that the rapid growth of the cocaine market has increased the number of experienced smugglers, and that this has driven down the cost of bringing cocaine into the United States. Experienced smugglers can control their risks better than novices: they know more about the risks of particular methods of importing, have better connections with corrupt officials, and can obtain better credit from their suppliers. Prior to 1980, there were relatively few experienced smugglers, and they could not, without raising their risks a great deal, provide enough cocaine for the entire market. Thus the price of cocaine smuggling was determined by the marginal smuggler, a novice trying to become an expert.

Novices, if they are not caught, eventually become experienced. Interdiction is obviously more successful with novices than with ex-

perienced smugglers, because the latter are better at avoiding interdictors. But enough novices make it through, at least when the market is expanding rapidly, that the stock of experience may grow relative to the size of the market. With enough experienced smugglers in the business, they can supply the entire market, and the price for smuggling services will fall. This seems to be a plausible account of why the cocaine import price has tumbled by as much as two-thirds since 1981.

But if this account is correct, we must then accept some possibly nasty consequences of intensified interdiction. Experienced smugglers can benefit from interdiction, since it catches the potential competition; their profits will rise without a corresponding increase in risk. If there is a cartel of experienced smugglers, with an interest in trying to set prices for cocaine smuggling, then its prospects may certainly be enhanced by intense interdiction, the disproportionate weight of which falls on the newcomers. The recent four-ton seizure mentioned above was generated by a tip from Colombia, though the shipment came from Brazil; perhaps the cartel is attempting to gain control of the market by helping interdictors.

Another irony that emerges from systematic analysis of the interdiction program concerns the source countries. Interdiction can impose costs on smugglers in a variety of ways. But inasmuch as it involves the seizure of drugs, interdiction will increase the earnings of source-country producers, thus exacerbating the problems with which the U.S. government is urging the source-country governments to deal.

The explanation for this conundrum lies in the fact that source-country earnings come from all drug shipments, not just from those drugs that are actually consumed. Some of these shipments reach users. Others are seized. Total demand for producers equals the sum of shipments that are seized and those that reach their destinations. As more is seized, total export demand goes up. Of course, higher seizures will raise smuggler costs and thus reduce demand, but it is possible to show that only under highly improbable conditions will the price increase reduce demand by more than enough to compensate for the increase in demand caused by the seizure itself.

It is not inevitable that more successful interdiction leads to an increase in export demand. If interdiction can make smugglers take more precautions and raise their non-drug costs (personnel, transportation, or corruption payments), then it will reduce total shipments. It is difficult to determine whether such a goal can be achieved in practice, however.

The Mexican border

Clearly the porousness of the Mexican border is an important part of the problem. It has become the principal gateway for all three of the major imported drugs: cocaine, heroin, and marijuana. Yet among the source countries, Mexico is the only one that seems not to have developed its own significant drug problem (in that domestic drug consumption has not increased there); hence it is the one source country in which pressure might actually have some impact.³

In trying to persuade the other major source countries (Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru) to make a serious effort to curtail drug exports, the U.S. government is usually handicapped by two factors. First, the earnings from drug production are an important source of income for large peasant populations, and generate a significant share of the nation's export earnings. Second, the source-country government either has weak political control of some of the growing areas (Bolivia and Peru) or is facing an opponent that has the capacity to threaten the lives of government leaders (Colombia). The first condition creates ambivalence, the second incapacity.

Neither of these conditions applies to Mexico. Drug earnings are not a significant share of total export income or even of the regional income in the areas in which drugs are produced. The Mexican government does not incur any major political threats by cracking down on the drug trade. In fact, the government has been reasonably active, and the Mexican Attorney General has pointed, with considerable ire, to the large number of Mexican policemen (154) that have died in drug-enforcement efforts, undertaken largely for U.S. interests. Indeed, it is likely that more Mexican than U.S. police have died while attempting to enforce U.S. drug policies.

Clearly, it would be naive to expect that Mexico could eliminate either drug production or transshipment; after all, the U.S. domestically produces an increasing share of its own marijuana (perhaps as much as one-third), despite highly publicized and well-funded efforts at eradication. Transshipment is of course even harder to stop; the U.S. does not manage to capture a large share of the drugs that move within its domestic commerce, either. But it is not unreasonable to expect Mexico to cooperate with the U.S. in cross-border control—to allow "hot pursuit" of smugglers, for example.

³ For an analysis of the obstacles to effective control of source-country exports, see my "Eternal Hope: America's Quest for Narcotics Control," *The Public Interest*, No. 79 (Spring 1985).

Mexico has chosen not to do so. U.S. planes must turn back at the border, and cannot receive coordinated support from Mexicans in pursuing those planes further. The explanation for this seems to lie less in corruption, to which U.S. politicians often point, than in the sensitivity of Mexico about its political autonomy. History provides some basis for that sensitivity, which has probably been heightened by recent finger pointing. Getting cooperation from the Mexicans on border control is one way of making progress on the interdiction front (though I remain skeptical that it will make a major difference for the long-term availability of cocaine or heroin, given their compactness).

The role of the military

The temptation to reach for the military is understandable. The armed forces have vast quantities of equipment designed to ensure that we can see our enemy, rapidly close in on him once he has been seen, and attack him if he does not agree to follow our orders. Surely the armed services must be able to do this against drug smugglers, still not a very high-technology foe, if they are to be competent against the nation's better-armed strategic adversaries.

The problem is that smugglers have a different set of goals from those of America's other adversaries, and that drug-interdiction efforts require acceptance of certain constraints that do not apply in wartime. Smugglers do not seek to cross the border in large numbers in a short period of time; they seek instead to enter in a steady flow, disperse once they are over the border, and never reassemble. More importantly, this nation is not willing to impose the strict entry requirements that are almost automatic during wartime. We still wish to allow regular commerce and tourism. Long delays at the Mexican border for commercial traffic, such as those that resulted from Operations Intercept and Alliance, are regarded as intolerable for any length of time. Pleasure-craft owners, as formidable a middle-class lobby as the private-pilots' association, are not going to agree to increased restrictions on their activities for the sake of catching a few extra drug smugglers.

Thus the heart of the problem—especially after adopting more stringent interdiction measures—is distinguishing smuggler from innocent. Data from the Coast Guard, which has sole jurisdiction outside U.S. territorial waters (sometimes using Navy equipment), point to the problem. Even when the Coast Guard has prior information that a vessel may be carrying drugs, only one out of eight of

those boarded is found to have drugs. This figure is about five times higher than the agency's success rate when it has no prior information, but it nevertheless points to the difficulty of recognizing smugglers.

The military can ensure that the Coast Guard will see more vessels and pursue more of them for the purpose of boarding, but it cannot do much to help the maritime services distinguish the indistinguishable. Smugglers do not need distinctive equipment, and can readily blend in with other traffic. As a result, the book of hull types issued to Coast Guard commanders is a thick one; the thicker the book, in this case, the less information it imparts.

Maritime interdiction has been oriented primarily toward catching marijuana smugglers, and has certainly made smuggling from the Atlantic coast of Colombia a fairly risky business. But an increasing amount of cocaine now seems to move by sea as well, and represents a much more difficult target than marijuana. A 100-kilogram shipment of cocaine is much harder to detect, once the boat is boarded, than a five-ton cargo of marijuana. Thus even if the military does increase the number of ships seen, halted, and searched, it is likely that the cost of smuggling cocaine by sea will remain modest.

The military problem here, unfortunately, is similar to that faced by the U.S. when it attempted interdiction of North Vietnamese supplies heading into South Vietnam. It is the simplicity of the enemy's needs and technology that makes interdiction difficult; there are no large, fixed targets whose destruction makes a difference. Smuggling organizations are also capable of the decentralization, adaptability, and capacity to camouflage themselves in the civilian traffic and population that made the Viet Cong such an elusive target.

The politics of interdiction

However original the foregoing analysis, its conclusions are familiar: greater efforts at interdiction are not going to have much of an effect on the nation's cocaine problem. A similar argument can be made with regard to much of the federal enforcement effort.

Given the general lack of faith in the effectiveness of enforcement, why does it still attract so much support? Clearly no member of Congress wishes to be on record as being "soft" on drugs. A vote against a proposed increase in drug enforcement incurs the risk of such an accusation. Budgetary limits, in theory, force any increase in the drug budget to be weighed against some other (presumably desirable) program. In fact, as was shown in the recent contingency

bill passed by the Senate, it is possible to get around these trade-offs by labeling the drug problem a crisis.

Those politicians who are more thoughtful about the problem, and see beyond the rhetoric of the drug warriors, face further obstacles if they wish to achieve visible results in the short run. Maybe prevention is the principal long-run hope, but does that necessarily mean that the nation should immediately spend large sums on prevention efforts? Precisely because prevention has been slighted in the past, we have no well-developed models of what works. We know a good deal about what does not work—programs that aim to scare adolescents, for example, or simply telling them about the pharmacology of drugs—and we know, from smoking-prevention programs, something about the design of what does work. But moving from principles of design to working programs, particularly for schools in inner cities, is a long step. A lot of research is necessary before good prevention programs are readily available.

Given these facts, it is scarcely surprising that Congress continues to push enforcement programs on an administration that is visibly wearying of the fight it entered with so much enthusiasm. Interdiction does produce visible results: drugs seized, assets confiscated, smugglers imprisoned. Spending more will almost certainly produce more of each of these desirable outputs. What effect this has on the drug problem is almost secondary—or at least Congress acts as if it were; for Congress never seems to raise the issue, either with the interdiction agencies or with its own watchdog, the General Accounting Office.

What is largely neglected by both branches of the federal government is the less glamorous set of programs that make up the drug-treatment sector. There is not much of a constituency for these programs, which are often staffed by ex-drug offenders, and which offer services primarily to underclass drug users. Few of the programs' clients seem to be cured of their drug problem, and many have long histories of arrests and continued drug use while in the programs.

Public treatment programs have been systematically starved of funds since 1981; their share of the federal drug budget has shrunk from about 19 percent in 1981 to 14 percent in 1988. Yet intensified enforcement and the more addictive nature of crack have greatly increased the demand for their services. There are long waiting lists for treatment in most major cities. Creating better treatment programs, which can handle the variegated populations now at their doors, should be an important goal.

This is not to say that the interdiction program should be abandoned. The standard estimate of the economic cost of drug abuse in this country is somewhere between \$50 billion and \$100 billion—and that does not include a number of social costs, such as the fear of crime, that might add substantially to the figure. If the billion-dollar interdiction program reduces that cost by a few percentage points, society might judge it as money reasonably spent.

The real issue is whether we would obtain a greater reduction in the social costs of drug abuse if some of that money were allocated to other programs. I know of no analysis that would provide a firm answer to that question, but my own suspicion is that the nation would be better off putting more money into treatment and less into interdiction. A few more resources put into research, so that we can base policy choices on something firmer than instinct and image, also sounds like a reasonable expenditure.