



There Is No “Afghan Poppy Problem.”

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The cultivation and trafficking of poppies, the base crop for the worldwide heroin trade, are serious impediments to the Afghan government’s control of the countryside and to national security and development generally. Diminishing, if not eliminating entirely, ‘the poppy problem’ is, therefore, a major element in the campaign to bring stability and sustainable prosperity to the nation. Strategies proposed by American agencies, the United Nations, and non-governmental organizations such as the Senlis Council, all suggest variations on the same theme – eliminate the supposed root cause (literally) of the problem, poppy cultivation in rural villages.

The favoured strategies to this end, all of which are based in the same supply-side idea, is to eradicate the poppy fields, or provide an alternative crop for farmers, or buy out the poppy crop at source. Yet, strategies that misidentify the real problem have little chance of succeeding. The fatal flaw in the eradication, substitution, and free enterprise proposals is that they all assume that Afghanistan is dealing with a supply problem – the vast production of opium from rural poppy fields. In fact, the government is dealing with and farmers are reacting to a demand problem stimulated mostly from outside the country.

It is the demand for illegal drugs in North America, Europe, Russia, and in Asia that stimulates the cultivation and production of illicit drugs in Columbia, Africa, and Afghanistan and elsewhere.

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Farmers in Afghanistan grow poppies for the same reason individuals in Canada build “marijuana grow-ops,” because there is a continuous, profitable demand for their product.

Eradicating the supply today will alienate the rural community and may only reduce the poppy crop for one season. Providing an alternative crop or buying the harvest directly from the farmers will fail because even the simplest Afghan farmer will act in the circumstances like any “rational economic actor” beloved by economic theorists.

Basic economic theory and common sense suggest that if a new, richer buyer were to enter the drug market a bidding war with the resident buyers – the drug dealers – would begin and encourage more farmers to enter the business because the price would increase. Violence in the area would likely increase also as illegal buyers in this marketplace regulated by guns attack each other, the new buyers, and farmers as they try to control prices and market-share – see Chicago, circa Al Capone. International buyers would be the first on the hit list unless of course nations provided large numbers of combat units to provide security in the region. Arguably, the conflict would spread to other growing areas outside Afghanistan as the so-called free enterprise system began to distort the market worldwide.

And what would the world do with the drugs bought inevitably at inflated prices in a booming market? To throw the drugs on the legal medicine-opiate market as some suggest, (an enormous manufacturing challenge) would drive the price paid legal growers through the floor and require support payments for them too. In Afghanistan who would decide which



The Conference of Defence Associations

CDA Commentary 1-2007

farmers would be allowed into the price-guaranteed or licensed market – only those now in operation? Why not everyone who wants in, as required by “free enterprise” concepts?

The counter-effects of the buy out strategy would extend far beyond Afghanistan. Removing illegal drugs from the drug-user marketplace – and Afghanistan is the world’s major supplier – would create a medical and police emergency across the world as the availability of drugs fell and prices rose. Or should we simply buy the drugs at market prices and then distribute them freely about our streets? And why would the warlords disappear from the market when prices go up? Rather, the incentive to get into the business would surely increase as demand held steady and supply fell.

But perhaps the aim is to move workers out of the poppy fields and into “honest labour.” Some free market advocates argue, simplistically, that “poppy pickers are the highest paid agricultural workers of central Asia” because in their opinion the job is difficult and critical to producers. But this is, of course, a second order explanation. These workers are highly paid and their bosses make lots of money because the demand for their product is high and the source is controlled by illegal and violent means. Substituting another buyer would not change the poppy pickers’ status, but it might make them richer.

Substituting another cash crop for poppies on the assumption that farmers would readily move into this new market is also doomed by rational man. If farmers were convinced that there is money to be made growing carrots they might well sow great field of carrots. But why would they stop growing poppies when there is a continuing high demand for heroin? Rational man would grow both.

If we cannot retard and diminish the increasing, worldwide demand for illicit drugs, then there is little chance that farmers in Afghanistan or Columbia or grow-op entrepreneurs in Canada will cease

supplying the market. A strategy that might work in rural Afghanistan is one that would provide farmers with at least a marginal increase in wages over what they can earn from cultivating poppies with the same or marginally less effort and personal risk. But given the fact that the poppy plant grows so easily in the country and the low chance that Toyota or Pfizer will open branch plants in Kandahar anytime soon, the resourceful and rational Afghan farmer will sensibly grow poppies until the market for heroin disappears.

In the meantime, Canadians and international policy makers ought to be wary of crude strategies based in faulty notions; in this case, mistakenly seeing a demand problem as a supply problem. Simple strategies to eradicate the crop, substitute crops, and “license” producers will not dent the Afghan production of poppies or drug trafficking unless they are combined with other strategies to reduce the demand for drugs outside Afghanistan. Unfortunately, as the ten-years of failures of “Plan Columbia” illustrate, the prospects for coordinating effectively the supply and demand dynamics of the illicit drug trade so as to eliminate drug production in poor, rural areas of the world are not encouraging.

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