



Poppies for Medicine??

By

Brian MacDonald

The rather recently arrived, but amply funded, SENLIS Council has released the latest of its broadsides promoting its "Poppy for Medicine" project, while at the same time slagging Canadian diplomacy in Afghanistan.

The striped pants set probably shouldn't get their knockers in a knot, since SENLIS's treatment of CIDA and UNICEF was even more savage.

In fact, a fast tour through the e-mail exchanges, between the SENLIS field walah in Afghanistan and the local offices of CIDA and UNICEF, suggests it's unlikely that anybody in SENLIS has ever read Dale Carnegie's famous 1950s potboiler "How to Win Friends and Influence People!"

That may be a pity, for the key elements of the SENLIS Council's proposal for a pilot project to test the feasibility of their "Poppy for Medicine" ("P4M") project may actually be worth a look.

In a nutshell--SENLIS proposes that small groups of Afghan villages be

granted the authority to grow opium poppy for conversion locally into medical opiates for export to satisfy third world requirements for medical pain relief.

Technologically feasible? Maybe.

A recent study for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), titled "Documentation of a heroin manufacturing process in Afghanistan," records the steps by which "white heroin hydrochloride (is) produced using simple equipment and a small quantity of chemicals."

Setting aside for a moment questions of purity and quality control, and economics, one is left with the implicit premise that if criminal-grade heroin can be produced locally, why not try a pilot project to see if it might be possible to produce medical grade morphine, or codeine, or other medical opiates.

However, an overarching concern of such bodies as UNODC and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB),

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This article was initially published as an op-ed in *The Ottawa Citizen* on September 27, 2007

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which are international institutions tasked to oversee the administration of the 1961 *United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs* and its follow-on *Conventions*, is the potential for diversion of medical opiates into the criminal drug distribution networks.

Thus, the existing small poppy producer programmes in Turkey and India, authorized by the INCB to grow poppy for the production of medical opiates, depend heavily on close supervision of the farmers by Turk and Indian government agencies who buy the crop, backed up by the honest and sternly reliable Turk and Indian armies.

So, how does SENLIS propose to achieve a Turk/Indian level of control of licensed poppy production in order to avoid diversion into the criminal stream?

SENLIS makes a unique proposal to rely, not on the Afghan National Army (or especially the Afghan National Police) but rather upon the traditional Afghan social control structures to be found in the village *shuras*—described by SENLIS as “community-level governance structures which strictly enforce social norms and behaviour at all levels of social and economic interaction in rural Afghan communities, through the principle of collective responsibility.”

However, the “correlation of forces” (to use that old but useful Cold War term) between the criminal drug traders on the one hand, and the village elders of the *shuras* on the other, seems rather similar to the “facts on the ground” of Al Capone’s South Side in the Chicago of the 1920s, with the key difference being the substitution of the ubiquitous AK-47 for the equally ubiquitous Thompson sub-machine guns—the “Chicago Piano” so favoured by Capone and his mob.

Thus, without the firepower of the

Canadian Battle Group to protect it, the Poppies for Medicine pilot project in Kandahar won’t get off the ground.

It isn’t surprising, therefore, that SENLIS argues that the Canadians must remain in Kandahar past the end of the current mission in 2009.

SENLIS President, Canadian lawyer Norrine MacDonald, on the September 24 release of their new study, *The Canadian Government Must Develop Fast Track Approach to Peace in Afghanistan*, put it bluntly:

“We have to stay until the job is done. To leave before we have brought peace to the people of Afghanistan not only endangers Canada’s own security for generations to come, it would be throwing away the commitment of resources and sacrifices – including lives – that we have made in Afghanistan. Pulling out before achieving victory is tantamount to giving Southern Afghanistan back to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.”

“Poppy for Medicine” as a joint project of SENLIS and the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar—protected by the Canadian Battle Group in Kandahar post 2009?

Worth a look, maybe?

Maybe.