

Addiction to drug trade

U.S. customs agents finally ran out of patience two weeks ago: They impounded an Air Jamaica aircraft after finding marijuana hidden aboard. This year alone, U.S. customs has discovered some 10,000 lbs. of grass on the high-flying airline.

Irate officials in Washington are putting great pressure on Jamaica, an island kept afloat by U.S. aid, to throttle back the marijuana trade. Similar pressure is being exerted on other narco-nations, such as Colombia, Peru, Panama, Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico. But Washington's efforts don't seem to be having much success: Americans smoked an estimated 25 million pounds of marijuana last year. The busy drug enforcement agency managed to exterminate 13 million of the felonious plants in the same period.

Massive efforts by the DEA, now joined by the U.S. military, to block imports of drugs have caused a significant drop in imports of marijuana. This shortfall has been more than replaced by surging domestic production, about three million pounds of U.S.-grown in 1984. American dope raisers have taken a leaf from the book of the California wine industry by developing new, hybrid species of grass that are in some cases, as potent as the Latin American and Caribbean varieties. Endicott, Calif., has become the Napa Valley of the domestic marijuana trade.

As the narcotics trade has become more Americanized, southern exporting nations are beginning to suffer the consequences. For many of them, marijuana and cocaine have become the most important earners of foreign exchange, surpassing even coffee, a legal drug akin to coca. Meanwhile, worldwide prices for the key export earning commodities of Latin and Caribbean nations, such as sugar, bananas, cocoa, bauxite, tin and copper, have collapsed.

In Jamaica, for example, the largest source of U.S. dollars — essential for buying oil and just about all other imports — was bauxite ore. When demand for aluminum nosedived, Jamaica, with its sugar and banana exports already comatose, went on the skids. With 25% unemployment and a collapsing economy, the only way for many people to make money was by growing and exporting

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ganja, the island's head-spinning marijuana.

Without ganja, Jamaica would go bankrupt; there would be no gasoline, no spare parts, no medicine. Everything, from power to food, would become scarce.

This grim scenario is also true, to varying degrees, for Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. Like Jamaica, their national economies have become partly or completely addicted to the drug trade. In Mexico, entire communities survive by growing marijuana; in the bleak highlands of Peru and Bolivia, countless villages subsist only by growing coca leaves.

The U.S. has been loudly demanding that these nations uproot the drug trade. At the same time, the U.S. surgeon general has warned that tobacco is a killer and more addictive than marijuana, cocaine or heroin. But Washington has not had the courage to tell politically powerful southern farmers to stop growing tobacco, or, for that matter, to cut federal tobacco subsidies.

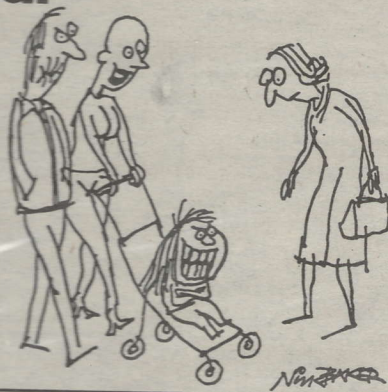
Southern nations may be forgiven if they react to U.S. pressure with some cynicism — particularly when they import billions of U.S. cigarettes each year. Until world commodity prices rise, most of these economically strapped nations will have to keep growing drug plants. Their real problem is now competition from U.S.-grown products. If this trend continues, southern nations will fast begin losing the dollars on which they depend for imports. Conversely, the U.S. balance of payments, now seriously in the red, will improve to the tune of billions annually.

It is surprising that more Third World nations have not gone into the drug business in a big way. Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, for instance, are all ideal climates for producing high-potency marijuana. Coca leaves, one assumes, could grow as well in central Africa's mountains, or in the Asian chains like the Pamirs or Karakoram, as in Peru. Should world prices for commodities continue to decline, more nations will likely become exporters of raw or refined drugs.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., Yankee ingenuity is hard at work developing new, ever more addlepatting forms of marijuana. In some deeply hidden laboratories, warped but brilliant minds must also be at work to create a North American form of cocaine, a sort of Nescafe of the drug trade.

When and if this happens, the southern nations will find their largest export business in peril. The result could well be widespread economic chaos that would, in turn produce political upheaval and revolutions — precisely what the U.S. government has been working so hard to prevent. Quite a dilemma this: Either allow more drugs to come in or risk revolution in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Punch



"He has my hair and Gerald's teeth."