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The problem of illicit drugs in the United s must be viewed against the backdrop of a well-oiled international drug trafficking network that hassustained the addiction of drug users and has lined the pockets of those who profit from this addiction. Indeed, in order to address illicit drug use at its core, it is imperative to understand the workings of the drug trade – the production, transport and distribution that takes place before eventual consumption.
Many Americans assume that illicit drugs in the United States come from Latin America, without really understanding the dynamics between the drug cartels and the relationships of the players with each other. In truth, Colombian drug organizations and Mexican drug organizations have traditionally taken different roles in the drug trafficking chain. In the article by Lyman (2011), the relationship started with Mexican drug organizations acting as surrogates and partners of their Colombian counterpart drug organizations – taking advantage of the borders between Mexico and the United States to smuggle in cocaine from Colombia (page 136). However, towards the end of the 1980s the Mexicans were no longer satisfied with being mere conduits and wanted a share both of the drug loot and the U. S. markets. Lyman explained the consequence of this:
Eventually, this arrangement with the Colombians not only resulted in dividing the cocaine shipments down the middle but in dividing much of the U. S. markets down the middle. As the arrangement evolved over time, the Colombians retained the wholesale market in the eastern United States as their own, and Mexican drug cartels took over the wholesale market in the Midwestern and Western states.
According to Bagley (1988), the expanded role of the Mexicans in the drug trade had created, in his words, “ an unprecedented wave of drug related violence in Mexico that seriously threatened the country’s fledgling process of democratization. (page 71)”. And this begins to answer the question as to whether or not these drug cartels are as much of a threat to the United States as traditional terrorist organizations.
In fact, it may even be argued that drug cartels are even more of a threat to the United States than the terrorist networks that people have come to associate with Islamic fundamentalist groups and the like. For one thing, the scale of violence wrought by drug organization can perhaps rival that of traditional terrorist organizations. Colombia’s principal guerrilla organization, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucion de Colombia or FARC, has been known to be involved in drug trafficking activities to finance the insurgency – thereby creating a lethal combination of drug money and armed tactics. But secondly and more importantly, the impacts of drug organizations are more pervasive than terrorist organizations, if you count the lives that have been destroyed because of the proliferation of the illicit drugs in the market. These are not only the drug users themselves, but also victims of drug-related crimes, and even helpless family members and loved ones of those who are held in a vise-like grip by their addictions.
That is why it is of great urgency that solutions to the drug problem take into account the drug cartels, and the enormous profits that are derived from the illegal and deadly activity.
References
Bagley, B. (1988) “ The New Hundred Years War? U. S. National Security and the War on Drugs in Latin America”. Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 30 (1). 71-92.
Lyman, M. D. (2011). Drugs in Society: Causes, Concepts and Control. (6th Ed.), Burlington, MA: Anderson Publishing.