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Forum panelists critical of status quo in Drug War

by Elizabeth Ruiz

The context of the war on drugs in Latin America and Mexico was the focus of the first panel discussion, titled "History, Successes and Failures", at the Global Public Policy Forum on the U.S. War on Drugs, which took place in the UTEP student union on Monday morning.

Posted on September 21, 2009

The panelists included Dr. Luis Astorga from the Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico; Juan Carlos Hidalgo, project coordinator for Latin America at the Cato Institute; Tom Barry, policy director for the International Relations Center; Joy Olson, executive director of the Washington Office on Latin America; and Terry Nelson from Law Enforcement Against Prohibition.

[Click [here](#) for more on the conference.]

Kathleen Staudt, UTEP political science professor, and Dudley Althaus of the Houston Chronicle co-moderated.

The panelists were critical of the status quo in the drug war. "I think that the U.S. drug policy in general has failed. I cannot discount at all the tremendous amount of devastation and violence caused by drugs and drug trafficking," said Olson.

Olson also talked about the supply/demand aspect of drug production, saying that efforts by law enforcement to stop production in one place simply disperse it and move it to another location. "So when we focus in on different areas and succeed in one place, what we ended up doing is succeeding in moving the problem somewhere else. What we found is that when we succeed, we end up devastating somebody else."

For example, she said, "The biggest impact that fumigation had in Colombia was moving drug production and changing the way drug production took place. It was no longer taking place on bigger plots of land; it was now taking place on smaller plots of land. And after massive fumigation from 2000-2006, production went from being in 12 departments of Colombia to being in 23 departments in Colombia."

She said that just because the amount of drug trafficking-related violence has decreased since the passage of Plan Colombia, she contested the idea it has been a success. "What you found is that after all of this fumigation, you have not stopped drug cultivation in Colombia. They moved it around; they made it harder to go after."

Another example is a local one -- in the 1980s, cocaine trafficking routes moved from Miami to Mexico, leading to the rise in power of the Mexican cartels.

Nelson said that the control over drugs has to be out of the hands of traffickers. Speaking on behalf of his organization, he said: "We're the radicals in some people's eyes, but we believe that legalization will work. But instead of scaring people to death with legalization, we say 'Legalize, regulation and control of narcotics.'"

"The global war on drugs is probably the greatest public policy failure, in my opinion. Forty years of failure," he continued. On the drug czar, he said: "If he ends the drug war, he loses his salary, so maybe he has invested interest in keeping it going."

He spoke about the root of crime in countries affected by the drug war. "Prohibition of drugs causes crime. The drug use doesn't. It's a bad choice. It's a bad decision." He continued: "Drugs and illegal trafficking corrupts everything they touch. All the countries in Central America have deaths because of the drug war. We can't think of it as just an American solution or American problem. It's a global problem."

In a translation provided with the presentation, Astorga said that political decisions in Mexico creates criminals and traffickers. He also said that the situation of states in Mexico in relation to the drug traffic routes determined the degree of potential for corruption.

Barry said that issues affecting immigration and drug policy issues were interlinked, with high amount of imprisonment of criminal aliens in U.S. Marshall and bureau prisons, and he mentioned specific figures in Reeves County, Texas, in which the 3,700 immigrants in the prison get longer sentences if they had past records. "Seventy-five percent of the criminal aliens there have drug crimes. There is this integral connection between what our immigration policy is and criminal policy."

Barry said that drug control is increasingly an aspect of the border patrol. "In the last year, the border patrol has had a record number of seizures that is 93 percent marijuana."

Hidalgo talked about the consensus among Latin American countries that the consensus on the war on drugs has failed. Mexico and Argentina decriminalizing drugs, "We see around the world more skepticism towards the current approach that Washington promotes, which is criminalization," he said.

Hidalgo said that the war on drugs, including the fact that the price of cocaine has gone down and is more accessible over the course of the war. Mentioning the cost of the war, which is in the billions, he said: "We should worry about the way that the tax money is being spent."

"Since 1989, more people have been incarcerated for drug crimes than for all violent crimes," he added.

He said with the current U.S. drug policy of prohibition, drug traffickers are making huge profits. “Depending on the drug, at least 90 percent or more of the retail price corresponds to the black market premium that prohibition brings about that makes the drug business extremely profitable. And these profits are so enormous, that about 90 percent of these drugs can be interdacted and the drug business can be profitable.”

During the question and answer session, Staudt addressed the absence of the border and drug czars from the Obama administration.

Staudt answered, saying that the conference organizers were informed very recently that they would not attend, and that the replacement for the border czar would not attend due to a scheduling conflict. “Many people, including myself, are concerned about why these political appointees and bureaucrats have decided not to come to this conference,” she said.

Following the presentation, she spoke about how the messages from the panel discussions might possibly reach Washington despite the absence of the border and drug czars.



For more background, click [here](#).



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