THE U.S. "WAR ON DRUGS" IN THE ANDES: A FAILED STRATEGY

by Coletta Youngers (*)

INTRODUCTION

In an address to the nation in September 1989, then- President George Bush launched the "war on drugs" -- a war focusing not on U.S. inner city streets, but on the so-called "source countries" of Peru, Bolivia and Colombia Almost five years later, as a new administration takes office, it is clear that the war in the Andes has been lost and indeed could never have been won.

The "Andean Initiative" was based on the premise that U.S. military aid and technical assistance to Andean police and military forces could stem the flow of drugs out of Latin America, effectively reducing the supply of cocaine that would eventually reach the U.S. market. A reduced supply would, according to the theory, drive up its price and, hence, make cocaine less accessible to the North American consumer. The Andean region became the primary recipient of U.S. military aid to Latin America, and an unprecedented U.S. military build-up in the Andes was initiated. U.S. Green Berets were sent on training missions, and the Pentagon established a sophisticated surveillance and intelligence gathering apparatus -- including blanket radar coverage of the Andes -- to facilitate interdiction efforts and the planning of surgical strike operations against drug trafficking targets.

This strategy was fundamentally flawed. From the beginning, it was clear that the Andean militaries were not ready to take on the role assigned to them. Combatting drug trafficking is not a priority for Andean security forces, particularly in Peru and Colombia where entrenched insurgencies are waging war. Moreover, throughout the region corruption is rampant -- ties between local military and police forces are well established and not easily broken. Washington has been able to provide the information and equipment for antinarcotics operations, but it could not provide the political will on the part of the local forces involved to assure that U.S. plans would be carried out.

Thus despite U.S. international drug control efforts, all evidence indicates that U.S. antinarcotics programs have been able to intercept only a tiny percentage of the cocaine coming out of South America. Over the course of the Andean Initiative, coca production has expanded at an alarming rate and there are more South American drug cartels involved in the cocaine industry. Today, there are more drugs available on U.S. streets at lower prices. Despite encouraging reductions in drug use among certain social sectors, the number of hard-core drug addicts continues to increase. In *The Making of a Drug Free America,* Mathea Falco reports that "in 1991 the number of Americans who reported using cocaine at least once a week jumped 25 percent from the previous year."[1] The "war on drugs," as conceived by the Bush administration, has failed dramatically.

THE SUPPLY-SIDE APPROACH[2]

One year after the Andean Initiative was initiated, former Drug "Czar" William Bennett announced that significant progress had been made in combatting international drug trafficking. Two factors were highlighted to support this assertion: the higher price of cocaine in some U.S. cities and the low price of the coca leaf in Bolivia and Peru. In regards to the latter, credit was given to the Colombian government's crack down following the murder of presidential contender Senator Luis Carlos Galan in August 1989. The enhanced antinarcotics efforts reportedly disrupted the Colombian traffickers operations such that coca leaf purchases dropped off, causing the price to fall as coca supply far surpassed demand. In fact, those early "victories" were short lived -- the very logic of supply-side policies preclude success in the

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1 Mathea Falco, *The Making of a Drug Free America* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 10.

2 Parts of this paper, subsequently revised, were originally published in *The War in the Andes: The Military Role in U.S. International Drug Policy,* The Washington Office on Latin America, 14 December 1992.

long-run.

The Administration maintains that by going after drugs at the "source," cocaine production can be thwarted at its most vulnerable stages. The closer to the beginning of the chain -- coca cultivation -- the more effective the strategy. Government officials often remark that it is easier to find a coca field than it is to find a kilo of cocaine in the streets of New York.

While this statement in itself may be true, simple laws of supply and demand illustrate the futility of the supply-side approach. If eradication and interdiction efforts are successful in a given area, the price of the coca leaf and of cocaine may in fact go up in the short-run. That, in turn, creates incentives for increased production and the development of "new" products (such as synthetic drugs). The availability of land for coca cultivation feeds this chain; if coca crops are eradicated in one area, farmers will move deeper into the jungle to grow it. If one country effectively interdicts cocaine shipments, new routes are found out of other areas. Simply put, supply side efforts may provide indicators of success in the short-run, but in the long-run, market mechanisms -- principally the profit motive -- assure that supply of cocaine and other illicit drugs is driven by demand.[3]

In fact, despite Bennett's early prognosis of victory, the price of coca leaves in Peru and Bolivia went back up to very profitable levels, repeating historical patterns of price fluctuations. In Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley (UHV), coca cultivation and operations of international drug traffickers, primarily from Colombia and Brazil, have shifted towards the central and lower Huallaga in response the spread of a fungus that attacks the coca plant and to police antinarcotics efforts. Those actions have not dented production, but they are a nuisance. Ironically, antinarcotics activities have stimulated decentralized production and the opening up of new lands for coca cultivation in Peru.

Similarly, the 1989 crack down in Colombia led to an increase in cocaine production and trafficking activities in Ecuador, Brazil and Bolivia -- setting in motion a trend that continues today. For the first time, Peru -- traditionally an exporter of coca paste to Colombia for refinement into cocaine -- now has its own cartel, led by "El Vaticano," and cocaine production is on the rise. In Colombia itself, drug trafficking has spread from the Medellin region to other parts of the country, particularly Cali. As the Medellin cartel has borne the brunt of antinarcotics efforts and has suffered from internal divisions, new cartels have sprung up and the Cali cartel quickly moved to become the most important drug operation in the country.

THE MILITARIZATION OF DRUG POLICY

Although international drug trafficking was first declared a national security threat by former President Reagan in 1986, it was the Bush adrninistration that effectively militarized the policy and brought the U.S. military on board in a significant way. Bush and his advisors also sought to put Latin American militaries on the front lines of the drug war -- but with little success.

Despite the President's mandate, the role of the U.S. military in antinarcotics operations overseas continues to be a matter of much debate. For years, the Pentagon resisted attempts by Congress and the Administration to increase its involvement in drug-related activities. Most notably, former Secretaries of Defense Casper Weinberger and Frank Carlucci strongly objected to the policy shift. In 1985, Weinberger wrote, "reliance on military forces to accomplish civilian tasks is detrimental to military readiness and democratic processes,"[4] reflecting a common concern that involvement in antinarcotics activities detracts from the military's primary mission of national defense and threatens the precedent established in the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 which prohibits the U.S. military from engaging in civilian law enforcement activities. Echoing the same tone as his predecessor, Defense Secretary Carlucci declared to Congress in 1988 that manning the front line of the country's drug war "is not

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3 For more information, see Peter Andreas and Coletta Youngers, "U.S. Drug Policy and the Andean Cocaine Industry," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 1989.

4 Quoted in David Isenberg, "The Army vs. Cocaine," *Old Oregon* (Spring, 1990), p. 26.

the function of the military."[5] Many in the military expressed concern that they were being pushed to take the lead in an unwinnable war.

Proponents of an enhanced role for the U.S. military argued that illicit drugs represent a national security threat and that only the military has the power and resources to combat it effectively. When Reagan signed the National Security Directive on April 8,1986 officially declaring drugs a matter of national security, authority was given to the military to plan assaults, equip police forces and transport them to sites of action. Since then, the powers granted to the military have steadily expanded. The FY1989 National Defense Authorization Act declares the Department of Defense (DOD) the lead agency for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States. DOD was also given the task of centralizing all drug intelligence and operations information into a single communications network.

Perhaps of greatest significance, in November 1989 the U.S. Justice Department's office of legal counsel issued a legal opinion concluding that U.S. military personnel can arrest drug traffickers and others overseas. In other words, the military can apprehend accused drug traffickers abroad -- a power they do not have in this country -- without host country consent. Similarly, the military is now less constrained by rules against assassinations overseas, facilitating military operations against suspected drug kingpins.

On September 18, 1989 when Defense Secretary Richard Cheney ordered the Pentagon to embrace the primary role in drug operations assigned to it and announced that the military would develop a plan for its antinarcotics activities abroad. The plan -- which encompasses border control, aerial and maritime surveillance, intelligence gathering and training of troops in the Andean countries -- was released in March 1990; institutionally, the U.S. military accepted its role in the drug fray. It was rewarded accordingly: funding for the pentagon's antinarcotics activities jumped from $880 million in fiscal year 1988 to $1.2 billion in 1992.[6]

The U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom) in Panama was given the primary role in carrying out the U.S. military's drug war. General Maxwell Thurman, in charge of SouthCom at the time, quickly became the Pentagon's point man in the drug war. If others in the military have shown reluctance to get more involved, Thurman took on a personal crusade against drug trafficking, declaring that "the Latin American drug war is the only war we've got."[7] While in charge of SouthCom, Thurman put into place the military antinarcotics strategy that is now in full swing.

The Pentagon's drug plan calls for the U.S. military to provide intelligence and strategic planning for the Andean nation's military forces, which are assigned the task of actually carrying out the counter-narcotics operations. According to government officials, ideally this assistance facilitates coordinated strike operations against key drug trafficking targets. In other words, the U.S. military was to be the behind-the-scenes actor that would assure that successful antinarcotics operations were carried out by the Andean countries.

A key component of the Pentagon drug plan was the installation of a surveillance and intelligence gathering system designed to improve both border interdiction efforts and antinarcotics operations in the Andean region itself. The intelligence gathered from the Andean region is centralized in SouthCom. This system assures the Pentagon -- with SouthCom at the helm -- primary control over information analysis. Ultimately, the system assures that SouthCom has the upper hand over local governments in operations being carried out in the Andean countries. In addition, U.S. Special Forces are training local troops, and DEA officials continue to train local police forces for antinarcotics activities.

U.S. officials insist that its military forces are not used in actual antinarcotics operations. However, President Bush reportedly changed the rules of engagement to allow U.S. troops to accompany local forces on training missions, increasing the likelihood of direct combat

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[5] Lee Feinstein, "Fighting the Next War," *Mother Jones* (July/August 1990), p. 34.
[6] Approximately $2.6 billion is budgeted annually for U.S. interdiction and international drug control activities.
[7] Douglas Jehl, "GIs Escalate Attack on Drugs in S. America," *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1990.

with traffickers or insurgents. (DEA forces regularly accompany such missions.) Some reports by U.S. Special Forces, however, indicate that their role goes considerably further than admitted by the U.S. government. "There are a lot of ways to get killed down here, and our best survivors here are the Green Berets," according to a Special Operations staff officer at SouthCom, "It only makes common sense to let them go on combat missions with their newly trained and equipped drug teams. School is one thing. These jungles are another."[8]

LATIN AMERICAN MILITARIES: FRIENDS OR FOES?

The Bush government's international drug policy was premised on the assumption that Latin American militaries would be allies in the drug war. That assumption was highly dubious from the start. For years, military forces in the Andean countries voiced opposition to involvement in antinarcotics operations for two stated reasons: fear of corruption and other priorities. On the one hand, corruption abounds where drug traffickers operate. In the case of Peru, for example, police seek out positions in the UHV because they are so lucrative. High-ranking military officials often claim that they do not engage in antinarcotics operations because they do not want their ranks to become involved in the drug trade. On the other hand, the clear priorities of these militaries are protecting national borders and, in Peru and Colombia, combatting guerrilla insurgencies.

In fact, members of both the police and military forces in all three countries are already plagued with corruption. As a result, not only have military forces refused to participate in antinarcotics activities -- in some cases these forces have actually impeded them. A 1990 Congressional report documents cases of Peruvian military forces firing upon local police and U.S. DEA agents on patrol in the UHV. For example, the report notes that:

"In two separate incidents during the second week of March 1990, Peruvian police units travelling over the UHV in INM-owned helicopters were fired upon by military personnel. In both instances, the police helicopter was travelling from Tingo Maria to Santa Lucia on routine maintenance runs when it observed a trafficker's Cessna approaching an airstrip in the town of Ramal de Aspuzana where Peruvian military officers were waiting. The helicopter flew close enough to scare the plane into flying off in a northerly direction toward the town of Tocache. The helicopter was low on fuel and was unable to follow the plane. On the helicopter's return trip to Tingo Maria, the crew heard automatic weapon fire and the door gunner saw military personnel in the hills firing at their helicopter."[9]

Local residents often claim that Peruvian military personnel close off the main highway through the area to allow Colombian traffickers' planes to land. Once the coca paste has been loaded and money has exchanged hands, the road blockade is taken down.

In Bolivia, the role of the military in drug trafficking during the Garcia Meza regime is amply documented.[10] Because of the Bolivian military's history of involvement in drug trafficking, many Bolivians were astounded by U.S. insistence that the armed forces -- and the army in particular -- be integrated into antinarcotics operations.

In response to these concerns, U.S. officials claimed that with the proper training and support from the U.S. government, corruption could be significantly reduced. However, the history of antinarcotics programs in Bolivia -- as elsewhere -illustrates the difficulty of significantly reducing corruption. As a result, the forces trained by the United States are continually lost to collusion with the traffickers. Although UMOPAR (the Bolivian antinarcotics police) have continually won high praise from the U.S. Embassy in La Paz for its antinarcotics efforts, troops and officers are constantly turned over. In one bold sweep in May 1991, dozens of top officials were reassigned or dismissed for suspected corruption.

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8 Quoted in Peter Andreas, "Drug War Zone," *The Nation,* (11 December 1989).

9 House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations, "Stopping the Flood of Cocaine With Operation Snowcap: Is It Working?," 101st Congress, 2d Session (1990), p. 38.

10 See James Dunkerly, *Rebellion in the Veins* (London: Verso Editions, 1984).

The impediments to the Andean initiative presented by the corruption problem were illustrated in a raid on the village of San Rarnon, considered to be a drug trafficking center, shortly after the war on drugs was launched. The U.S. Embassy in La Paz claimed that the operation, which took place on November 8, 1989, was "the largest counter-narcotics enforcement operation in recent times."[11] Designed to capture leading drug traffickers and to seize a large depot of precursor chemicals and arms, the raid was planned by a special team of three SouthCom military officers and included 30 DEA agents and over 300 UMOPAR (Bolivian antinarcotics police) troops.

While the raid was declared a great success by the U.S. government, the Congressional report just cited debunks that claim. Despite the tight security around the operation, information was leaked to the traffickers known to be in the town at least twelve hours before the raid was to take place. Hence, they fled, taking the "evidence" with them.[12] Moreover, the virtual occupation of the town by the DEA and UMOPAR greatly angered local residents, illustrating the lack of public support for such operations and the hostility they generate.

Thus, SouthCom's showpiece drug raid sparked a public protest, while failing to achieve the desired results. It netted no traffickers, no precursor chemicals or arms and only 4.8 kilos of cocaine hydrochloride. The drug operation apparently failed because of an information leak, throwing into question the effectiveness of the present SouthCom strategy. Since November 1989, this scenario has played itself out many times over in Bolivia Although this particular incident took place in Bolivia, it could have just as easily occurred in Peru or Colombia.

The lesson is clear. U.S. military and other officials can provide information, can work out the logistics of an operation, and can provide equipment to facilitate its implementation. They cannot, however, create the political will on the part of the local forces involved to assure that the sophisticated plans will be carried out as envisioned. The assumption that the U.S. military can persuade Latin-American militaries to carry out the operations it designs was fundamentally flawed.

COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS PREVAIL IN COLOMBIA

Nowhere has this been clearer than in Colombia, the country the U.S. government points to as a model for military involvement in antinarcotics operations. Although the U.S. government provided significant levels of aid to the Colombian military, its involvement in antinarcotics activities increased only marginally. During the first few years of the Andean Initiative, the Colombian police carried out an estimated 80 percent of all counter-narcotics operations, though it received less than 25 percent of U.S. antinarcotics-related aid.

Significant evidence indicates that the money provided to the Colombian military was diverted to counterinsurgency activities. The Colombian military has been battling a number of guerrilla groups for decades. Despite the peace treaties negotiated with the smaller insurgencies, guerrilla-military conflict involving the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) has steadily escalated.

This situation was clear from the beginning. In March 1989, General Jose Nelson Mejia, Commander of the Colombian Military Forces, and General Luis Eduardo Roca, Chief of Staff of the Colombian Defense Ministry, informed Congressional staff that $38.5 million of the $40.3 million initially appropriated for the Colombian military for FY1990 would be used to support "Operation Tri-Color 90," a major new offensive against the insurgents. A three year operation that began in April 1989, Operation Tri-Color 90 will utilize one-quarter of Colombia's Army and a large portion of its Air Force to root out guerrillas in northeastern Colombia According to the military leaders, the U.S. assistance was to provide most of the logistical support for the operation. When questioned by Congressional staffers as to how this would further antinarcotics goals, they responded that "if processing facilities were located,

[11] House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations, p. 56.
[12] Ibid., p. 56.

they would be destroyed."[13] In short, the Colombia military made clear its intention to use U.S. military aid for counterinsurgency rather than antinarcotics operations. U.S. drug money was in effect contributing to one of the most brutal counterinsurgency campaigns in the hemisphere.

Two months after the U.S. government delivered $65 million in aid to the Colombian military in September 1989, local human rights organizations noted a dramatic increase in counterinsurgency activities -- including aerial bombardments of rural communities -- in certain regions of the country, particularly in the northeast. In Yondo for example, the military strafed various hamlets with helicopter artillery fire and dropped bombs on a "clandestine airstrip" (the main road through the area) and on a "guerrilla camp" (the home of Harold Pedroza, which was totally destroyed). Hundreds of families were forced to flee to refugee centers in nearby Barranca Following the exodus, the military went into the area on foot, searching for "subversives." Two were found -- an elderly couple who were blind and deaf and therefore had not heard the planes overhead. When villagers returned to the area they found the couple's mutilated bodies not far from their house. Despite their age and handicaps, the two had been brutally tortured and left as an example for those who dared return to their land.[14]

Similar bombardments have taken place throughout the Santander region and in other areas -- southern Cordoba, El Meta, northeastern Antioquia and other parts of the Magdalena Medio -- leaving thousands of internal refugees in their wake. Witnesses claim that A-37 planes and Blackhawk helicopters were used in the attacks. In September 1990, the U.S. government sent eight A-37's to the Colombian military as part of the $65 million emergency aid package. Several Blackhawks owned by the Colombian military were purchased with the help of a $170 million loan guarantee from the Export-Import Bank, for which the U.S. State Department had to issue a "determination" that Colombia had an acceptable human rights record.

Whatever the intentions of the U.S. government, given this situation the provision of aid to the Colombian military has lent direct support to a counterinsurgency campaign characterized by massive human rights violations. In the most generous interpretation, some aid is being diverted to such activities. U.S. officials have repeatedly declared that if U.S. assistance can serve both antinarcotics and counterinsurgency purposes, then all the better. (Though some in Congress, which approves the aid, feel differently.) However, other than a few showcase raids, the Colombian military has not engaged in antinarcotics activities and has shown little interest in doing so. Thus, it may be that the aid sent through the Andean Initiative did not further the U.S. government's stated objective -- combatting drug trafficking -in the least.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN PERU

From the beginning, the military aid package for Peru encountered serious stumbling blocks: the reluctance of the Peruvian security forces to take on antinarcotics activities and their dismal human rights record. Two successive Peruvian presidents refused to sign a military aid agreement with the United States. President Alberto Fujimori initially followed the path laid by his predecessor, Alan Garcia, by refusing to sign an accord unless the U.S. government agreed to provide both economic and military assistance to his beleaguered country. Ultimately, the U.S. agreed to Fujimori's demands in order to get the program moving in Peru and an agreement was finally signed in the spring of 1991--nearly two years after the Andean Initiative began.

The military aid program, however, hardly got off the ground. The U.S. Congress temporarily suspended security assistance to Peru in August 1991 because the Peruvian government failed to meet the human rights conditions in U.S. law which must be complied

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[13] U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations, pp. 83-84.

[14] For additional information on Colombia's human rights situation see *Colombia Besieged: Political Violence and State Responsibility* (The Washington Office on Latin America, November 1989).

with for a country to receive security assistance, sparking the first major debate in the U.S. Congress on human rights in Peru. Although the Congress eventually released the bulk of the aid package, $10.5 million in counterinsurgency training, weapons and equipment proposed for the Peruvian army was canceled, and the delivery of the remaining $24.85 million was conditioned on compliance with further human rights requirements, most of which have yet to be met.[15]

On April 5, 1992, Fujimori closed the Peruvian Congress and judiciary and suspended the constitution. The U.S. government responded quickly and firmly, suspending all non-humanitarian assistance to Peru and withdrawing 20 to 30 U.S. Special Forces engaged in training operations. After Peruvian jets shot at a U.S. C-130 surveillance plane on April 24, 1992, killing a crew member, the Administration suspended anti-drug flights over Peru. For many members of the U.S. Congress, the shooting incident was the last straw. Rep. Dante Fascell, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee at the time, called for the Administration to "reassess the fundamental premises of its Andean Strategy before further lives are lost."[16]

Although law enforcement assistance was resumed shortly thereafter, the coup and the plane incident appear to have marked the end of military aid to Peru. The military aid package for fiscal year 1992 was eliminated by the U.S. Congress in a recision bill passed in June of that year, and no military aid was appropriated for Peru in fiscal year 1993. Other restrictions were also placed on aid to Peru.

The few ongoing anti-narcotics operations in Peru have met with little success. The U.S. government sunk millions of dollars into the Santa Lucia police base in the heart of the UHV. As coca production has spread to other regions of the country, that base has become increasingly irrelevant. Radars used to intercept drug flights have been moved in and out of Peru, again with little success. Peruvian journalist Francisco Reyes reported recently that "an estimated 700 drug flights take off each year from airstrips in Peru's coca growing regions; since Fujimori's 'war' on drugs began last April, the Air Force has intercepted only four airplanes carrying drug shipments."[17] Most estimates indicate that less than one percent of all drug shipments out of Peru are intercepted.

A FAILED STRATEGY

By early 1992, the Bush administration's strategy began to waver. During the course of the 1992 San Antonio Summit, the U.S. press reported that U.S. military aid would be shifted away from the Colombian and Bolivian armies to the other branches of the armed forces and the police. In both cases, Andean government insistence appears to have been the dominant factor in taking their armies out of the programs. In the case of Bolivia, the U.S. government reluctantly admitted that U.S. efforts to get the Bolivian army involved in antinarcotics operations had failed.

Support for the Andean Initiative in the U.S. Congress, which had played a significant role in mandating military involvement in the drug war, has been on the wane. Until last year, Congress had backed virtually all of the Bush administration's security assistance requests for the Andes (with the exception of military aid to Peru). Last year, however, Congress significantly reduced U.S. security assistance to the Andes. While members of Congress had previously criticized the Bush administration policy quite vocally, they were reluctant to restrict funding and open themselves to the criticism of being "soft on drugs." In 1992, a general congressional sentiment to reduce foreign aid spending -- and security assistance in particular -- made most programs vulnerable to reductions. Andean antinarcotics programs were not spared, as key members of Congress acknowledged that the strategy was not working.

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[15] For more information see, Coletta Youngers, *Peru Under Scrutiny: Human Rights and U.S. Drug Policy,* The Washington Office on Latin America, 13 January 1992.

[16] Quoted in John Walsh, *Andean Initiative Legislative Update,* The Washington Office on Latin America, July 1992, p. 5.

[17] Francisco Reyes, "Peru's Deadly Drug Habit," *The Washington Post,* 28 February 1993.

CONCLUSION

The Clinton administration has yet to put forward its drug policy and has not filled any drug-related posts, including the "Drug Czar." However, there are signs that President Clinton will begin to de-militarize U.S. policy in the Andes. White House statements generally indicate a shift in emphasis away from international interdiction programs and towards domestic education, treatment and local law enforcement. With fiscal constraints looming, the new administration will probably continue to reduce overseas security assistance, including military aid and training programs in the Andes. Elements within the U.S. military itself that have remained wary of the drug mission may see the change in administration as an opportunity to make their case anew. It is time for a new approach. To begin constructing an effective policy, the Clinton administration must cast the issue not as a war to be fought on the battlefield, but as a social and health problem to be dealt with here at home.