

The Untold Drug Bust

By Eric E. Sterling - *Washington Times*, September 3, 1999

On August 25, federal agents arrested dozens of airline employees engaged in the smuggling of drugs, concluding a two-year sting. The media coverage was massive. All the networks ran stories; there were long segments on CNN and PBS - and front page stories in almost every newspaper.

Although the prominent coverage was justified, the drama was a journalistic disservice because it misrepresented the real story and, worse, helped maintain public and political myopia on effective anti-drug strategy. Journalism - the fourth estate - must not only inform the public but be a check on the claims and enthusiasm of government.

In one account, the traffickers were discovered because heroin they had camouflaged in food service coffee packets was used to make coffee served to an airplane pilot while in flight. No doubt about it, that's a story.

The government penetrated the smuggling ring and was able to convince some of the couriers to smuggle weapons, such as a hand grenade, on a passenger aircraft. Once again, that's a story.

Although the massive news coverage picked up on the novel aspects of the event, it was largely reported in the typical "biggest bust ever" style. For decades now these drug bust stories have been reminiscent of Vietnam-style "body count" journalism - an impressive parade of captives and commentary regarding a battle victory that makes the public feel that we are winning the war.

The public is left with the impression that law-enforcement is decisively effective in its contest with drug smugglers; that a major drug trafficking enterprise has been eliminated; that a method of smuggling has been thwarted. These impressions are false.

This ring was discovered by accident. Most drug-enforcement is accidental and rarely strategic. That's why in 1998 only 41 of over 20,000 federal drug offenders were sent to prison as so-called "kingpins."

What's the best measure of law-enforcement's impact on drug traffickers? Look at the market. Heroin and cocaine prices on the streets are at record low and the drugs have never been more pure than last year, according to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. This is a powerful indication that traffickers continue to discount the risks they face from law-enforcement and other sources.

Another important measure of success is availability to children. But shockingly, heroin and crack cocaine have never been easier for teen-agers to get, according to last year's "Monitoring the Future" survey by the government. Thirty-five percent of

the nation's high school seniors reported heroin was fairly easy or very easy to get, the highest percentage since the survey began in 1975. And 43.8 percent said the same about crack cocaine, the highest percentage since the question was first asked in 1987. About 90 percent reported the same about marijuana's almost universal availability.

At best, law-enforcement seizes only 10 percent to 30 percent of the illegal drugs smuggled into the United States each year, leaving plenty of supply for the lucrative market. There are thousands of smuggling incidents every day at the hundreds of airports, seaports and border stations in the United States. The truth is it is impossible to adequately police border crossings for drug smuggling without halting the economy.

About 20 semi-trailer loads of cocaine -- roughly 400 tons -- is enough to satisfy U.S. demand for one year. Millions of semi-trailers enter the United States each year. Of the approximately 900,000 commercial trucks entering the United States in 1996 that were searched according to stringent narcotics guidelines, only 56 (.006 percent) of the labor-intensive efforts resulted in narcotics seizures. How many trucks or cars with drugs made it into the United States? Only the smugglers know. And that's just land borders.

Unfortunately, reports of high-profile drug busts comes at the expense of reporting on the more significant but more complex issue of demand reduction -- e.g. drug use prevention and treatment. Every credible study shows us that drug treatment is vastly more effective than supply reduction in fighting drug abuse problems. But journalistically, it is easier and more exciting to focus on the high drama of drug interdiction.

The recent drug bust story is incomplete until we report that this raid will have no effect upon the price or availability of drugs. It will have no effect on the rate of drug use. And, most tragically, it leaves the false impression that we are winning the "war on drugs" -- and thus hinders focus on a better strategy to deal with drug abuse and addiction.

Eric E. Sterling, President of the non-profit Criminal Justice Policy Foundation in Silver Spring, MD, was Counsel to the House Judiciary Committee, principally responsible for anti-drug legislation, From 1979 to 1989.