

QUOTATION

REINFORCERS, PUNISHERS, CHANGEOVER DELAYS, AND COCA LEAVES

We celebrate the appearance on a distinguished editorial page of a straightforward analysis in environmental terms of behavior under multiple controls.

In a good year, a Bolivian farmer may net about \$1,500 from the coca leaves he can grow on a hectare of land. Or, these days, he can tear out the coca plants and collect \$2,000 per hectare from the Bolivian Government. That sounds like a good deal—but not many farmers consider it good enough. The reasons are worth pondering as the Bush Administration pursues its new effort to reduce the supply of drugs at their source.

There is a strong case for trying to persuade Bolivian coca farmers to grow something else. While coca has been grown and consumed for centuries in the Andes, many farmers are relative newcomers with no deep cultural attachment to the crop. As the booming American cocaine market drove up prices, thousands of tin miners or discouraged farmers from other areas moved into the coca growing regions, just as promises of gold or oil money once drew hordes to Alaska.

Now prices for coca leaves have begun to fall. The 100 pounds that brought \$120 or more a few years ago may bring little more than half that today. With the market glutted, the price is likely to keep falling. Stepped-up police harassment of the middlemen who purchase raw leaves would depress the price even further.

As prices fall, the program of \$2,000-per-hectare payments becomes more interesting. Participating farmers are also eligible for credits, seeds and supplies and the help of an agricultural extension agent, all arranged by A.I.D., the U.S. development agency.

So far the results are disappointing. There may be 60,000 families cultivating 40,000 hectares of coca in Bolivia; only 2,500 families, cultivating about 3,000 hectares, have abandoned the drug crop. Why the reluctance to switch? Even though the price of coca leaves may be falling, it remains far more reliable than one obvious alternative, coffee. And Bolivian farmers have so far resisted the more exotic choices, like macadamia nuts, that the U.S. Government is pushing.

There is an ideal substitute: oranges. Growing conditions for them are excellent; in fact, oranges were a big crop before coca took over. In those days Bolivia actually exported juice, which today it must import. But replacing coca bushes with citrus trees means waiting a few years until the trees bear marketable fruit. Once harvested, oranges may have to be carted to distant markets. By contrast, coca leaf buyers show up, cash in hand, at the farmer's gate.

Those are problems that money could solve: more generous credits to see orange growers through to the first harvest—and, thinking big, funds for a juice processing plant to buy up local fruit with no hassle. Why not make a serious investment in so constructive a project? Many American officials would love to do just that—but their hands are tied. America's foreign aid law contains a provision, passed at the behest of American growers, prohibiting use of any aid money to support foreign citrus industries. It's a ludicrous restraint: Bolivian juice won't ever pose much threat to the American industry.

A new foreign aid bill now moving in Congress may lift the ban. Well, it should. Protectionism is poor policy in general. Where it actually protects the raw material for cocaine, there is no excuse.

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