
Defense Report

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The Military In The Drug War—Truly A Valid Mission

When Congress last year appropriated \$308 million for military assistance to civilian drug intervention efforts, there was no intent to have the 82nd Airborne Division patrol the back streets of America with fixed bayonets.

What the legislators sought was to expand the authority of the Armed Forces to support and assist civilian law-enforcement agencies in fighting the importation of illegal drugs into the United States. For the most part, there wasn't anything really new in that legislation. Over the last several years, Congress has gradually approved a step-by-step increase in military participation in drug intervention activities—almost invariably with the stipulation that there should be no diminution of the primary missions of the military services.

Such activities as using some naval vessels to back up the Coast Guard's Caribbean patrols, volunteer National Guardsmen searching trucks crossing the Mexican border, using reconnaissance and tracking aircraft to patrol the southern skies, and a whole range of intelligence and surveillance activities, are assignments that are well within the capabilities of trained soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen. Those kinds of assignments when carried out in close coordination with the Coast Guard, U.S. Customs Service, Drug Enforcement Administration and civilian law enforcement agencies, can help raise the ante on the illegal import of drugs without putting the military in the position of directly enforcing civilian laws.

Of the \$308 million voted last fall for military assistance to the anti-drug effort, over \$40 million will be allotted to the National Guard for its use in aiding state law enforcement officials to detect and destroy sources of illegal drugs. Another large portion of the Defense Department funds (\$130 million) will be used to establish a balloon-mounted radar screen across the Southern U.S. from California to the East coast of Florida.

There are many additional ways to use the valuable resources of the Armed Forces to combat the scourge of drugs without their direct involvement in law enforcement and without detracting from military readiness. The issue is so crucial that it demands the very best efforts of us all.