



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 8, 2011

War on Drugs Grows FAST Abroad

Even programs within the drug war itself have a way of extending their reach. The latest example is a project called FAST: Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team. Created in 2005, the program initially set out “to investigate Taliban-linked drug traffickers in Afghanistan,” according to a [New York Times](#) report. Soon thereafter the program expanded far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. “The D.E.A. now has five commando-style squads it has been quietly deploying for the past several years to Western Hemisphere nations — including Haiti, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Belize — that are battling drug cartels, according to documents and interviews with law enforcement officials,” the paper reports.



Besides Afghanistan missions, which have resulted in the deaths of at least three DEA agents and the critical wounding of another, FAST “commandos have also been deployed at least 15 times to Latin America,” says the *Times*. Their activities include raids on drug kingpins in Guatemala, training and arrest missions in Haiti, and a firefight with cocaine smugglers in Honduras. Referring to the last incident, which left a Honduran officer wounded and two drug traffickers dead, then-Honduran Minister of Public Security Oscar Alvarez told the *Times*, “I don’t want to say it was Vietnam-style, but it was typical of war action.”

That is part of the problem. U.S. forces, whether officially military or not, are engaging in combat in various countries in the absence of any specific authorization from Congress, let alone a full declaration of war. Indeed, as the *Times* points out, FAST’s “evolution ... into a global enforcement arm” shows “how policy makers increasingly are blurring the line between law enforcement and military activities, fusing elements of the ‘war on drugs’ with the ‘war on terrorism.’”

There is a good reason for that line of demarcation, which in the United States was actually codified in the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878. Law-enforcement officers are — or at least ought to be — obliged to respect the rights of suspects, treating them as innocent until proven guilty and using deadly force only when absolutely necessary. Military personnel, on the other hand, are trained to shoot first and ask questions later. Police officers need warrants to enter and search homes; soldiers just need bigger guns than the people inside. Blurring that distinction has already had detrimental effects domestically, and it cannot be good for citizens of foreign countries where FAST operates largely free of any oversight. (Americans living in those countries are not exactly safe either, as a missionary family from Michigan found out in 2001 when their airplane was shot down in a joint U.S.-Peru drug interdiction effort, killing the wife and her baby daughter — a crime for which the CIA agents involved were given the [mildest possible punishments](#).)



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University of Miami professor Bruce Bagley, who specializes in Latin America and counternarcotics, told the *Times* that while “the commando program carries potential benefits” in disrupting the international drug trade, it also contains “potential dangers”:

It could lead to a nationalist backlash in the countries involved. If an American is killed, the administration and the D.E.A. could get mired in Congressional oversight hearings. Taking out kingpins could fragment the organization and lead to more violence.

And it won’t permanently stop trafficking unless a country also has capable institutions, which often don’t exist in Central America.

Then again, even in countries with “capable institutions” such as the United States, drug trafficking continues unabated. The demand for the prohibited substances is so strong, and the profits to be made by supplying them so great (and made greater by the prohibition), that wiping out the drug trade is simply impossible — which doesn’t stop Washington from trying, even though previous foreign anti-drug-trade programs have been costly, risky, and ineffective. According to the *Times*,

The FAST program is similar to a D.E.A. operation in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which drug enforcement agents received military training and entered into partnerships with local forces in places like Peru and Bolivia, targeting smuggling airstrips and jungle labs.

The Reagan-era initiative, though, drew criticism from agency supervisors who disliked the disruption of supplying agents for temporary rotations, and questioned whether its benefits outweighed the risks and cost. The Clinton administration was moving to shut down the operation when five agents died in a plane crash in Peru in 1994, sealing its fate.

In 2000, when the United States expanded assistance to Colombia in its battle against the narcotics-financed insurgent group called FARC, the trainers were military, not D.E.A. But after the invasion of Afghanistan, the Bush administration assigned Mr. [Michael A.] Braun, a veteran of the earlier effort, to design a new program.

That program was FAST. And why not ask Braun to design it? The earlier program had succeeded so marvelously.

Like all the previous programs, FAST is destined to fail, as well it should because the U.S. government has no constitutional authority to enact drug prohibition at home, let alone enforce it abroad. Regardless of its success rate, however, the program is likely to grow inexorably, swallowing up Americans’ tax dollars and foreigners’ lives and liberties — that is, until either the American voter or fiscal reality intervenes to force Uncle Sam to go cold turkey on the War on Drugs.



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