

The War in the Andes

The Washington Post
F. Andy Messing, Jr.
July 9, 1990

The June 22 op-ed column "The War in the Andes" by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak concerned a report generated by my foundation. It in turn generated a number of comments, which I feel compelled to address.

John M. Walsh of the Washington Office on Latin America took the classic "blame-America-first" position on combating our drug problem {Free for All, June 30}. He wrote that "drug abuse is essentially a public health problem, symptomatic of social and economic crises in the United States itself. National security is therefore an inappropriate framework for reducing drug abuse."

Mr. Walsh ignored the effects of the tidal wave of organic drugs generated abroad, which always exceeds our users' demands and violates America's sovereignty, laws, international law and, ironically, even the parasite country's laws. We share his concern about the "militarization" of these types of conflicts but for different reasons.

The ambassadors of Peru and Bolivia stated that their respective countries "are working closely" with our country in "the anti-coca effort" {letters to the editor, July 2}. Government sources, the U.S. media and myself, along with the other author of the 60-page documented report, have found this not to be the case in on-site investigation during the past year.

For example, Peruvian army units engaged in drug transactions were caught firing on our observation helicopters, and Bolivian officials have become notorious in compromising joint operations. Both governments have dragged their feet.

The ambassadors further stated that the use of herbicides by America "does not take into account the human, economic and environmental costs of such a pervasive use of deadly poisons." First, laying aside the fact that the Andean region is really not all that concerned with the plight of the United States, eradication, which would take three to five years-whether it was a bilateral, multilateral or even unilateral decision-would be followed by a mini-Marshall plan to stabilize these areas.

As for environmental questions, the chemical under consideration for the job is Tebuthiuron, an environmentally safe, plant specific, spray- or pellet-dispensed, low-cost chemical that does not enter the food chain.

Further, Tebuthiuron is safe compared to what's going on now-the pollution of the Amazon through the dumping of thousands of tons of toxic chemicals used in the making of lethal drugs; and the denuding of the oxygen-generating, triple-canopy jungle to make room for coca plants.

Finally, the ambassadors' statement that our contemplation of "unilateral action would be an outrageous intrusion on the sovereignty of" their nations is incorrect. Drug-producing countries have essentially had their sovereignty taken away from them by the drug lords. Any action to restore law and order and protect ourselves is morally and legally justifiable in spite of parochial opinions to the contrary.

The final critic, Julio E. Gianella {letters, July 2}, rehashed some of the other incorrect comments. He too was overly concerned with the fate of one coca-growing campesino and not enough with the crops that

that farmer grows that kill or disable thousands. He didn't focus on the fact that most coca farmers would return to legitimate farming given the eradication of their illegal crop.

If the volume of drugs flowing into this country is not reduced substantially, there is no way on the demand side that we can have quality treatment, education and domestic law enforcement given the small and finite resources we are dedicating to this fight.

If, while we are in a losing posture, we tie our hands behind our backs by not considering every means to defend ourselves, we will be foredoomed. America owes its people the effort to prevent another 200,000 crack babies, more AIDS cases and crime.

If this is a "war," let's not limit our options to protect ourselves.

F. Andy Messing Jr., Executive Director National Defense Council Foundation, Alexandria, VA.