



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS

OF

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE ECONOMIC CLUB OF DETROIT

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COBO HALL
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NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from the text. However, he stands behind this speech as printed.

Thank you very much Mr. Evans, ladies and gentlemen. I am very honored to have been invited here today to address your esteemed organization. The Economic Club of Detroit has been a real leader in providing forums for the discussion of important issues of public policy. In this era of the ten-second news bite, it is reassuring to know there are still some groups like the Economic Club that are interested in taking the time to understand the subtle nuances and intricate details of today's complex domestic and international problems.

I noticed that your past speakers have included my Cabinet colleague Bill Bennett and Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker who addressed the problems of education reform and our relations with South Africa, respectively. Those are the sorts of issues that are particularly susceptible to demagoguery by the headline hunter. They are also the type that we in government must confront constantly, and that compel us to make some very tough decisions.

Today, I would like to discuss the toughest problem facing those of us in government and law enforcement. That problem, of course, is the trafficking and use of illegal drugs.

As many of you know, I just returned from a week-long trip to South America where I was able to see first hand the immensity of the challenge we face. During our seven days down there, we

visited five countries -- the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia -- and let me say that the scenes we saw were staggering.

To give you just one example, when we were in Peru we flew over the Huallaga Valley, northeast of the capital of Lima. As we flew over that region, there were coca plants literally as far as the eye could see. Not just a patch here or there, but thousands of patches of coca plants, and shack after shack with coca leaves drying out in front. Even for one such as myself, who has spent a great deal of his life in law enforcement, such a sight was overpowering.

After viewing scenes like that, one is not surprised to hear the dismal statistics. In Peru, for instance, almost half a million acres of coca plants are now under cultivation. That makes coca Peru's largest cash crop, accounting for nearly 30% of its foreign exchange.

In saying all this, however, let me make clear that I had nothing but positive impressions from my discussions with the presidents and ministers of these countries. These are men who want to do what is right, who want to rid their countries of the drug trade, and who want to reclaim their economic and political systems from the drug barons.

In my talks with Peruvian President Alan Garcia, for example, he assured me that he wants Americans to remember him as the Peruvian chief executive who provided the leadership needed

to eliminate the coca plants. In Colombia, which produces or transports at least 80% of the cocaine entering the United States, President Virgilio Barco Vargas fully agreed on the need to defeat the drug lords of the Medellin Cartel, who have gunned down scores of public officials, including Colombian Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyas. And while I shall address the problem of drug demand a little later, let me say that all drug users in our country, even casual users, bear a direct responsibility for the deaths of men like Attorney General Hoyas and other courageous officials, including the three Peruvian eradication workers who were killed by drug assassins one day after my visit there.

All the South American leaders agreed with us that strong law enforcement was an essential ingredient in our mutual struggle against the drug producers and traffickers. And while it is true that words often come easier than performances, these governments have shown by their actions that they are genuinely committed to solving this enormous problem.

In Peru, President Garcia's government is poised to start large-scale experimental aerial spraying of the coca fields with a newly developed herbicide, tebuthurion, that has been successfully employed in the Southwest United States to clear brush. Tests on Peruvian soil are now being made here in the U.S., and the initial results show tebuthurion to be safe and effective. As soon as the final test results are in, Peru has

pledged to start increased experimental spraying. We estimate that Peru could eradicate 24,000 acres of cocaine a year through aerial spraying.

In Bolivia, their government and ours have cooperated in various successful endeavors aimed at destroying the market for the crops of Bolivian coca growers. Our first large-scale joint venture was Operation Blast Furnace in 1986. As you may recall, at the invitation of the Bolivian government, the Defense Department provided helicopters, equipment, and personnel to transport Bolivian police to the sites of numerous cocaine laboratories. These Bolivian police officers were also assisted by our Drug Enforcement Administration. As a result of this operation, many cocaine laboratories were destroyed. Because of the destruction of much of the Bolivian cocaine processing industry, the demand for the growers' coca harvest plummeted. At the conclusion of Operation Blast Furnace, the price of coca had dropped more than 80% -- effectively driving many coca growers out of business.

Since Operation Blast Furnace, the Bolivian government has continued its battle against the cocaine trade. In addition to paying farmers not to grow coca, President Victor Paz Estenssoro's administration is in the process of eradicating 4,000 acres of coca plants, and is planning to establish a new ministry of narcotics control.

What is truly amazing about Bolivia's relative success against the drug trade is that it has been accomplished despite the fact that its anti-narcotics police force is equipped with some of the most obsolete weaponry imaginable. Bolivian rural police officers are using antiquated World War I-era Springfields and M-1's. Many of these rifles are rusted, and are literally being held together by friction tape. And in this day when the private armies of the drug lords are carrying some of the world's most sophisticated fully automatic weapons, a Bolivian police officer virtually never fires his weapon in training because of the shortage of ammunition, and is issued only three bullets when ordered out on an anti-drug mission.

To assign brave men to work under such conditions is appalling. Assisting the Bolivian government in this area is therefore a top priority for us.

As I said earlier, these South American leaders and I agree that strong law enforcement is one of the keys to defeating the illegal drug trade. This Administration, especially, has devoted unprecedented resources to stopping the flow of narcotics into this country. The tough anti-drug programs initiated by the Justice Department and other agencies, and coordinated through the National Drug Policy Board, which I chair, have resulted in record seizures of drugs and a record number of arrests and convictions of drug criminals.

One example of our all-out commitment to intercepting illegal drugs is our ongoing Operation Alliance on our Southwest border. This cooperative interdiction effort involving Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies has been enormously successful.

This past December, for instance, a team of agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Naturalization Service, U.S. Customs Service, and state and local agencies combined to make the biggest cocaine bust in South Texas history. Concentrating on the growing drug smuggling activity around Brownsville, Texas, this Operation Alliance investigation led to the arrest of two smugglers driving an 18-wheeler, supposedly loaded with watermelons. Now these smugglers must not have been fresh fruit aficionados, because watermelons are not in season in December. For these two, what was in season was nearly 2,300 pounds of cocaine worth \$73 million, and 2,000 pounds of marijuana worth \$1.6 million hidden in the van of their truck.

This record seizure was not an isolated success. Just two weeks ago another Operation Alliance team of Federal and South Texas law enforcement confiscated a truckload of nearly 2,000 pounds of cocaine outside McAllen, Texas.

All told, Operation Alliance, since its inception in 1986, has achieved phenomenal results. In fiscal year 1986, the operation seized more than 60,000 kilograms of marijuana and 1,800 kilograms of cocaine. During the next fiscal year, the

amount of marijuana seized doubled to more than 133,000 kilograms, and the amount of cocaine seized quadrupled to nearly 8,500 kilograms. With seizures such as the ones at Brownsville and McAllen, the 1988 totals should be even more impressive.

Strong, aggressive anti-drug efforts like Operation Alliance, the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces, and others initiated by this Administration have resulted in a dramatic rise in the total amount of drugs confiscated by the Federal government. Over the last seven years, for example, cocaine seizures have risen more than 1,800 percent.

In addition to seizures, we have been jailing more drug criminals than ever before. We have vigorously enforced the Anti-Drug Act of 1986 which provided for mandatory minimum prison sentences ranging from five years to life imprisonment for various classes of drug offenses. Thus, where only 16% of Federal prison inmates were serving time for drug convictions in 1970, last year 37% of Federal prisoners were incarcerated for drug law violations. We estimate that within the next few years a full 50% of the Federal prison population will consist of drug offenders.

And as we are incarcerating drug traffickers at a record rate, we are also hitting them in the all-important pocketbook. Under the asset forfeiture provisions of the 1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act, the Federal government may seize any assets a criminal acquires using drug profits. This has effectively

destroyed the economic power base of many drug traffickers. At this time the Federal government is managing more than \$565 million in drug-tainted cash and property. A large portion of this total, almost \$80 million this year, will be shared with cooperating local police agencies, thereby increasing their resources to fight drug criminals.

But while strong law enforcement is an essential part of an overall anti-drug strategy, it is still only a part. As the media in those South American countries stressed to me, reducing the demand for drugs is as important as destroying the supply of drugs. And I wholeheartedly agree. Interestingly, the leaders of the countries I visited seemed to understand our equal concern for reducing the demand for drugs by our citizens.

Now there have been some who have accused us of concentrating solely on the supply side of the drug problem, and ignoring the demand component. Let me say that this is absolutely untrue. In addition to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, this Administration has created numerous programs aimed specifically at reducing the demand for drugs.

In the Justice Department, we have initiated a wide range of drug reduction activities. We have asked our 93 United States Attorneys to take on the responsibility of working with local law enforcement, education officials, and health authorities to come up with effective drug demand reduction programs for their jurisdictions. The U.S. Attorney in Utah, for example, has

sponsored a vigorous drug education program in every high school in the state. In Hawaii, the U.S. Attorney has conducted clinics for police, educators, and health specialists so that they can all work together to decrease the demand for drugs.

Also, the DEA and the FBI have created a Sports Drug Awareness Program that provides training and support to high school coaches around the country in setting up drug abuse prevention activities. This innovative program has recruited role model athletes like Detroit basketball star Isiah Thomas and heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson to encourage youngsters to resist the temptation to use drugs.

Further, we are close to implementing a plan we call "zero tolerance". Modeled after the successful program run by Pete Nunez, United States Attorney in San Diego, the "zero tolerance" strategy includes arresting and prosecuting persons carrying illegal drugs into this country, even if it is just for personal use. Plans to seize passports of persons arrested for narcotics offenses at the border are also under consideration. The record in San Diego shows that after these casual users are convicted, there is very little recidivism. In other words, by showing "zero tolerance" for drug use, demand is reduced.

These and other efforts, not only on the Federal level, but at all levels of government, have already shown signs of paying off. A recent University of Michigan survey sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that in 1987 there was a

drop in both the regular and experimental use of cocaine among high school seniors. This was the first time a drop had ever been recorded since this survey was started in 1975. Even more encouraging was the change in attitude toward drug use exhibited by these high schoolers. Just two years ago only a third of high school seniors thought that using cocaine once or twice was dangerous. Now nearly half feel that such use is dangerous. Further, an overwhelming 88% of these youngsters believe that regular use of cocaine would be harmful to a person.

Findings such as these are very significant because some experts tell us that if young people stay drug-free until they are 21 years of age, the number of chronic drug addicts would drop by an amazing 50%. This would deal a crippling blow to the illegal drug trade, and would almost certainly cut down on the number of drug-related murders, robberies, and other crimes.

In summary, I believe you can see that our anti-drug efforts have been anything but one-dimensional. We have pursued a multi-faceted strategy that first entails working on the international front with foreign countries to stop drug production and transshipment. It also entails working internationally and domestically with all levels of law enforcement to interdict drugs and prosecute traffickers. And finally, it entails working with officials and groups in our country to reduce drug demand.

While there is still much to be done, our record must be viewed objectively as one of accomplishment. Were it not for

this Administration's policies, the enormity of our country's drug problem would have been beyond belief. In these remaining months we will continue to work diligently to protect the health and safety of our communities from this menace that so threatens our lives and our futures.

Thank you very much.