

THE WAR ON DRUGS OTHER COUNTRIES' RUTHLESS VICIOUS CAPITALISTS

This long Benjamin Wallace-Wells piece on the lost war on drugs is worth reading in any case. But I'd like to pose his description of the fizzling war between drug gangs against the US response to such fizzling violence.

First, Wallace-Wells offers a description of the truce between two Salvadoran gangs earlier this year.

Early this year, a former Salvadorean guerrilla fighter named Raul Mijango began meeting secretly with the leaders of the nation's two largest gangs, Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18, in prison, in an effort to negotiate a form of truce. The Salvadorean street gangs (each of which was founded in Los Angeles) are not major international movers of drugs, but they are known for an almost tribal violence, and in recent years, the conflicts between the two groups has threatened to overrun the state.

Mijango would not say who authorized his mission, though it was widely assumed that the government had sent him. The gang leaders in prison did not consult their allies in Los Angeles. But Mijango, a former guerrilla fighter, knew what exhaustion looked like. "I sensed from the beginning that they felt that maybe this was the opportunity they were looking for," he says. In February, he asked the leaders to meet in the same room in a prison that had been set aside for that purpose, and though "the idea did not please them," Mijango says, he

felt some trust had been brokered when they saw one another face-to-face. Soon he had the framework of an agreement—in which the gangs would call off their feud with one another, would stop recruiting children. In return, the leaders wanted to be sent to other, more congenial prisons, where they could be closer to their families. That was all right with the authorities, and so, in May, the leaders were transferred.

The truce was not formally announced. The way that it reached the outside world was that the killing simply stopped.

This truce is just one of the reasons I'm so puzzled by Treasury's decision to list MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization earlier this year is so puzzling. Just after the US has made a slew of MS-13 arrests and MS-13 in El Salvador has backed off the killing, the US has decided to wield terrorist-like legal means against it.

As if we had to invent a reason to keep them illegal.

Then there's Wallace-Wells' explanation why—in spite of US based examples where you can target violence while leaving the drug sales intact—some top diplomats believe you can't end the war on "drugs."

Another reason legalization may not do much to diminish the violence is that some of the largest Mexican cartels, as they have moved more deeply into extortion and kidnapping, may be evolving out of the reach of drug policy. The problem is that some of the largest Mexican groups have moved deeper into extortion and kidnapping and have become less dependent on narcotics. "My fear is that if you legalize drugs tomorrow, I don't think you're going to

reduce the number of cartels or the amount of homicide or the flow of illicit goods,” says Adam Blackwell, a Canadian diplomat who is the secretary for multidimensional security at the Organization for American States. “Focusing too much on drugs takes us away from the real issues, which are”—he searches for the right word. “Structures. Cartel structures. Gang structures.”

Blackwell’s formulation almost exactly parallels what Hillary said yesterday about the drug war.

“I respect those in the region who believe strongly that [U.S. legalization] would end the problem,” Clinton said Thursday at a Washington D.C. forum hosted by Foreign Policy magazine. “I am not convinced of that, speaking personally.”

[snip]

“I think when you’ve got ruthless vicious people who have made money one way and it’s somehow blocked, they’ll figure out another way,” she said. “They’ll do kidnapping they’ll do extortion.”

But both Blackwell and Hillary suffer from a definitional problem. As a commenter here recently noted, drug cartels are actually not cartels; that’s part of why the competition between various gangs is so violent. So it can’t be the “cartel structures” that distinguishes gangs from other capitalist enterprises (many of which are much closer to cartels than drug gangs) that operate ruthlessly.

And while most purportedly legitimate businesses don’t kidnap (they leave that to the US government!), they do extort, though that usually takes the form of threats to take away market access.

At some point, when you take the violence away, the drug networks look like a significant group of very respectable American capitalist enterprises that use vicious techniques—that at least should and probably are illegal—to make money. At some point in this stage of the war on drug capitalists, we're going to have to get a lot more specific about what makes these capitalists bad even though they use many of the same approaches the capitalists running our own country use.