

THE COLD BEER BLUES BAR: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW TO THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN ANTI-COCAINE POLICY IN PERU

In February, 1998, I took a leave-of-absence from HIGH TIMES magazine, and with my family headed to my second home, Iquitos, Peru. For them, all Iquitos born but for my baby daughter, it was to be an extended trip home after several years in New York. For me it was to be an extended break from the horror of the War on Drugs that we editors at HIGH TIMES deal with on a daily basis. While for my family it turned out the way we supposed, for me it was quite a different matter. Iquitos, Peru is the overgrown jungle-town—not quite a city as yet—located just at the point where the Amazon river, moving south to north till that point, turns to make it’s way east to the Atlantic. It is the central city of western Amazonia, the market place of the Amazon. It is also the transshipment point for as much as 87% of the world’s supply of coca base, pasta, which is manufactured in the highlands to the south and headed for refinement in Colombia, from where, these days, it is shipped to the Mexican Cartels for worldwide distribution. One of the first things we did on arriving, simply to give my kids a meeting place, was rent a small building and open The Cold Beer Blues Bar, neither of which were available in Iquitos prior to our opening. And being run by a New Yorker it didn’t take long to become one of the few havens for ex-pats, American military personnel stationed there and the DEA, nearly all of which were in Iquitos ostensibly to aid Peru in stemming the flow of pasta. Several programs involving American military personnel, nearly all of them Special Forces, are currently in effect in Iquitos, including the Riverine Program—where we teach Peruvian military how to combat river and jungle narco-traffickers—the JAPAC Program—a Joint American and Peruvian program in which we supply sleek riverboats and military equipment to the Peruvian military and teach them not to sell it for parts, and a number of others. Nearly all of those from the ranks of either the Justice Department— primarily the DEA—as well as the military, knew who I was and knew what HIGH TIMES was. Rather, they knew me because of my 12 year association with HIGH TIMES. Many, particularly the DEA, admitted not only reading HT but being occasionally amazed by the magazine’s insight to their doings. Most posed, with their own cameras, in my BONGHITTERS softball jersey. All either admired or hated us. But while the military personnel kept a polite distance—they ate our food and drank our beer but kept conversation to a minimum—the DEA agents came in regularly, in part because our bar was located just across the street from the primary port in Western Amazonia—the place where the pasta had to pass to move on to Colombia, just 400 miles downstream. And the smartest of them, a big former cop from Philly named Tim, was quick to ask my opinion of how to stop the pasta traffic. “What would you do, Pete, if you were put in charge of stopping it?” Tim asked, probably on his sixth beer one night. “Legalize it,” I answered. “Assuming we’re not going to do that.” “Well,” I said. “Let’s see: There are only two roads out of the Amazon in Peru, both of them hundreds of miles from here, two-lane and closed a good part of the year, right?” “Right>” said Tim, his St. Bernard eyelids nearly covering his dangerous eyes. “So that’s not where it’s going. And even what’s shipped overland has to be then reimported into Colombia for finishing, so not much is going there,” I continued.

“Right.” “And you guys worked out the deal with the Peruvian military that you tell them what plane to shoot down and they do it for you, right?” “Right,” said Tim, sighing, obviously embarrassed to be associated with a Clinton administration’s strategy that had gone so woefully wrong: In 1997, the first year of the program, less than half the hundred-plus planes shot down were found to be involved with pasta traffic. Most of those downed were simply old puddle-jumping Cessnas not equipped with a radio so couldn’t answer a call for identification. Lots of missionaries wound up gator meat with that program until it was slowed down. “Which leaves the river,” I said. “Okay. But we know that, Pete.” said Tim. “Why do you think you have the Riverine Program and the JAPAC boys down here?” “On the surface. But let’s face it. If nearly the entire world’s supply of coca base is coming past this port right across the street, and if I really was in charge of stopping it....” I hesitated. “You know that while I’m not a fan of coke I would never make that call for others—right? I mean, I have spent years trying to legalize it even if I am not a personal fan of it, right?” “Right.” “Well, if it were me I’d put up a three inch steel cable across the river a mile upstream where it’s at its narrowest. I’d stop and search every boat coming to Iquitos. I wouldn’t just search some boats, like they do now. I’d search every boat, including the petroleum boats, the government boats, your own DEA boats and every riverboat on the Amazon. The stuff is not being moved by kilo, it’s moving by the ton. Which is nothing on a riverboat that carries two or three hundred tons of cargo, or an oil tanker carrying fifty times that. I bet it would take about a week to put an end to the cocaine trade worldwide. At least until they figured out another way to ship it.” “Com’on, Pete,” Tim said, shaking his head. “They’ll never let us do that.” “Of course not. But why? Because you know as well as me that neither you guys in the DEA nor the military are down here to really stop the cocaine trade.” “Hey Pete, let me tell you something,” Tim said, incensed. “We’re risking our lives every day out there in the jungle! We’re dealing with terrorists, narco-boys, corrupt police. Hell, even the good Peruvian task force boys have family in the business they want to protect. So don’t tell me what we’re here to do.” “I know, Tim. But face it, you’re window dressing. Your presence and the two or three kilos a week you help grab off the river or out of some dirt farmer’s pasta factory are just to pacify the do-gooders and prohibitionists. Nobody, particularly the US or Peruvian governments, wants or can afford to stop that trade. Without it the US has no ready cash for it’s dirty little wars that need untraceable dirty little arms. And without it the Peruvian government sinks in a month because they have no other business that generates any foreign cash at all.” “You know, I don’t like it, but you’re right. So what am I supposed to do?” “Just enjoy your stay here in Iquitos. There’s worse things to be than worthless window dressing. You could be back home in Philly getting killed in pointless buy-and-busts.” “You know what, Gorman? Fuck you. Give us another cold beer and stay out of politics.”

About the Author

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