

VIEWPOINT

Repelling the drug invasion

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Governor Bob Graham and the governors of four other southern states are justifiably calling on the federal government for help against an invasion of illegal drugs that their administrations are ill-equipped to handle.

Nearly all of the cocaine, most of the marijuana and about a third of the heroin smuggled into the United States comes from latin American and Caribbean countries. Most of it funnels through states that border the Gulf of Mexico.

The chief executives of Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas have issued a joint call for U.S. military forces to help their states interdict the drugs.

They made three important points. A paramount one is that illegal narcotics are a national problem, not one for their states alone.

They also say that their states don't have the money or manpower to cope with the well-financed and widespread smuggling operations. Governor Edwin Edwards of Louisiana pointed out that the cocaine on board just one airplane that crashed recently in his state was worth 20 times the annual budget of the state police narcotics bureau.

And they argue that the Defense Department ought to be concerned about the ability of drug traffickers to penetrate the nation's borders so easily. The U.S. Customs Service estimates smugglers make up to 18,000 flights a year across the southern border.

The Defense Department doesn't want to get involved on the grounds that enforcing drug laws is not its job and would interfere with its national defense tasks.

If the governors were asking the military to become engaged in domestic enforcement operations, the case against

such a move would be compelling. No one wants to give the armed forces that kind of law enforcement authority. But what the governors want is assistance against what they call an "invasion" from outside the country.

Nothing else seems to work. All of the grand plans regularly advertised by presidents and other Washington officials to halt drug smuggling have largely gone for naught. Using the military to help repulse the invasion ought to be worth at least a try.

The armed forces might even find that intercepting drug smugglers would be a useful exercise in preparing to repel invaders of another sort. If 18,000 drug flights can cross undetected every year, it indicates that the U.S. border is largely a sieve.

Village Advertiser Commentary:

On December 7, 1941, a tiny Far Eastern nation attacked a United States military base at Pearl Harbor and effectively blew our entire navy sky high. Decades passed before the American public was permitted to learn how precarious our military position was at that time. Had the Japanese followed up the attack with approaches to the mainland, no defense existed to repel them. Circumstances today are not much different.

Just think! How many places along our own shore could an enemy land unchallenged? Conditions are no different on other parts of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. And hundreds of small airstrips are being used to bring in drugs. They could be used as well to land material, supplies for invading paratroops, and spies. What's to stop them? In how many households these days might you find even a shotgun?