

Operation Intercept Junked

Liberation News Service

1969

LOS ANGELES (LNS)—Operation Intercept, billed as the biggest and best-publicized anti-narcotics campaign in history, has come to a close, according to officials in Washington—and with it closes a colorful and exciting chapter in the continuing story of America's War on Dope.

Late in September, Deputy Attorney General Richard Kleindeinst sat down behind a mountain of kilo bricks of pot at a Los Angeles press conference and said, "this is war." Two explanations were advanced by observers.

Some people, mostly reactionaries, argued that the intensive searches at the Mexican border were a serious effort to find pot that was being smuggled; others, the "insiders," whispered that the real purpose was to force Mexico to act against pot smugglers and farmers by harassing tourists.

Kleindeinst had put forward a sophisticated anti-pot strategy: since it's impossible to arrest everyone who turns on, the goal of Operation Intercept was to "drive the price of marijuana beyond the reach of young people." This policy of "pot for the rich" won the support of many prominent men of wealth.

A not-too-careful reading of official American statements suggests that persecution of Mexico was the real purpose of the Operation. Kleindeinst said, "the severity of Operation Intercept will impress top Mexican authorities with the urgency of wiping out marijuana fields," and one customs officer described the intensive border searches as "nothing less than limited economic sanctions against Mexico.

Reactionaries supported their claim that the searches were really intended to uncover smuggling by quoting Nixon press aid Herb Klein, who announced "the Nixon administration is eyeball to eyeball with the problem of marijuana traffic from Mexico and doesn't intend to blink." Presumably his pupils weren't about to dilate, either.

California newspapers' reports of the Operation reflected their interpretation of its purpose. Reactionary papers played down the border delays and trumpeted, "Border Check Halts Dope Flow." The embarrassing fact was that the intensified air, sea and ground searches turned up less smuggling than pre-Intercept days had. This was taken as a sign of success.

"The river of narcotics is drying up." According to this argument Intercept would be a complete success when they discovered no pot at all—a situation that could just as easily have been arranged by eliminating searches as by intensifying them.

One editor wrote, "most of the outcry that tourism will be hurt will be raised by those persons and organizations who want to see marijuana legalized in this country." Those persons and organizations apparently included the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times, all of whose reporting reflected the insider line on Intercept: don't go to Mexico, you have to wait too long at the border.

The L.A. Times headlines read "Six Hour Border Delays" and the news stories told of boiling radiators, vapor-locked fuel pumps, battered fenders, exhaust fumes and fist fights at the border crossings.

Kleindeinst had said that the Operation would strike at smuggling by air as well as land. There were stories of converted B-26s, packed with pot, flying in the middle of the night through low mountain passes, and pursuit planes for border patrol, presumably to blast the B-26s out of the sky if they didn't surrender their precious cargoes.

But, according to *The New York Times*, the air search was a flop; there wasn't any new radar, and the few planes they put into service couldn't keep up with the smugglers. Apparently the B-26s are still flying.

In its first week, Operation Intercept stopped and searched 2,384,079 people returning to the U.S. from Mexico. Each was given a message from the President of the United States on a green sheet of paper. It described the need for "a determined effort to end narcotics trafficking," and remarked that "the innocent traveler may be delayed or inconvenienced."

Nixon's War on Dope was an attempt to draw attention away from domestic problems and show disgruntled Americans that he could do something right. But it didn't win the support that he had hoped for.

Liberals wanted a war on organized crime, not on their kids. High-ranking California officials warned that depriving young people of pot would only drive them to the proverbial harder stuff.

And a newspaper survey of the California Congressional delegation showed that a majority favored liberalizing marijuana laws, not cracking down—they included the tap-dancing reactionary, Senator George Murphy.

Even the Bar Association was talking about making possession a misdemeanor.

So Operation Intercept is being relaxed. Presumably the Mexican government promised to monitor flights from private airstrips and burn more marijuana fields; they have announced burning already.

But Nixon's War on Dope didn't come anywhere near its real goal.

There are new protests at army bases, new marches demanding black jobs, new calls for ending the war.

Unless he can think up another public relations diversion, Nixon may have to do something drastic, like get out of Vietnam, now.

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