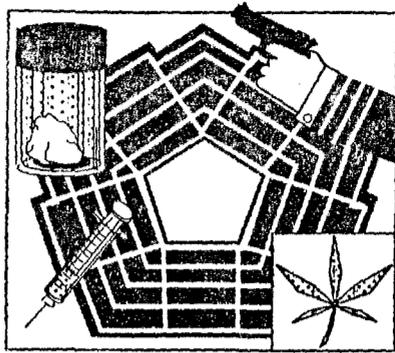


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Pacific War On Drugs Foundering

Audit Urges End Of Joint Task Force



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When Congress and the Bush administration stepped up the drug war more than two years ago, a reluctant Pentagon was pushed to the front lines, named as the "lead agency" for detecting and monitoring drug smugglers from the sea and air.

But now questions are being raised as to how useful the military's annual \$1.1 billion anti-drug effort has been. A blunt internal audit of the U.S. Pacific Command's anti-drug operations has found tens of millions of dollars in wasted funds, layers of needless bureaucracy and the deployment of random ship patrols that have been largely "ineffective" in finding smugglers and of little use to federal law enforcement agencies.

The report recommends that Joint Task Force 5, a much heralded Pentagon command and intelligence center in Alameda, Calif., be shut down. One of three task forces created by Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney to oversee the Defense Department's anti-drug activities, the JTF 5 "duplicates counter-narcotics capabilities at other (Pacific Command) activities and creates unnecessary operational overhead. . . . We recommend that JTF 5 be disestablished," according to the July 9 audit by the Defense Department inspector general's office that was released this week at the request of The Washington Post.

Its findings are not entirely surprising, according to some anti-drug analysts. Commanders and budget analysts in the Defense Department long have questioned the wisdom of military participation in the drug war and nowhere more so than in the Pacific: Trying to use military assets to detect drug smugglers in the ocean's 100 million square miles was always "a particularly implausible effort," noted Peter Reuter, a Rand Corp. economist.

Nevertheless, the Hawaii-based Pacific Command last year allocated \$23 million annually through 1995 to deploy radar planes as well as frigates and other ships on random or "routine" patrols in hope of finding drug smugglers plying the Pacific.

Nothing has turned up. A separate General Accounting Office study recently found that out of more than 200 boardings of ships carried out by federal law enforcement officials (usually Coast Guard officers) who accompanied Pacific Command anti-drug patrols, none resulted in seizures of drugs or the arrests of smuggling suspects.

The inspector general's audit also found no seizures and recommended

hard intelligence that a particular ship is carrying drugs.

In yet another criticism, the audit found repeated attempts by the multi-service Pacific Command to use the drug war to fund missions that had nothing to do with drugs. Out of \$195 million in anti-drug funds requested more than two years ago, \$152 million was subsequently ruled "invalid" in part because it was "unrelated to the counter-narcotics mission," the audit says.

The Pacific Command later submitted a revised \$47 million budget request that was approved, but the inspector general still challenged one item: \$4 million for a "secure video teleconferencing" center for JTF 5. The audit concluded the task force could use secure telephones instead.

Michael A. Wermuth, deputy assistant secretary of defense for drug enforcement, said JTF 5 provided important intelligence and defended the Pacific Command's contribution to the drug war as "very useful."

"We're not in the process of measuring our performance on the number of tons of cocaine seized," he said. He cited recent congressional testimony indicating that federal law enforcement agencies were grateful for the Pentagon's help.

But Wermuth acknowledged that the Pacific Command's routine patrols were "not effective" and that a decision had been made to discontinue them even before the inspector general's findings were transmitted. Although no announcement was made of such operations being stopped, Wermuth said "it was months ago, not days."

But the inspector general's office also questioned whether the use of any naval assets in the Pacific makes sense. According to the audit, JTF 5 has directed its efforts against maritime smugglers, usually the operators of "mother ships" who off-load their cargo to smaller boats hovering off West Coasts ports. These ships, the audit notes, almost always carry bulky marijuana, rather than easier to conceal cocaine or heroin. Those drugs are usually smuggled aboard passenger aircraft or concealed aboard commercial cargo ships.

By directing its operations against the maritime smuggler, the audit concludes, "JTF 5 has, as a result, limited itself to detecting and monitoring marijuana smuggling," a mission that is "contrary to the guidance" of the Central Intelligence Agency that the military concentrate on heroin and cocaine. The CIA had concluded that programs against marijuana "do not warrant substantial new intelligence investments,"