



SATURDAY, JULY 23, 2005

### Poppies! Poppies!

by Michael in New York on [7/23/2005 03:31:00 PM](#)

No, I'm not quoting "The Wizard of Oz," I'm referring to an intriguing op-ed in the NYT. It suggests that one way to deal with the heroin trade dominating Afghanistan is to encourage it. The writer points out the worldwide shortage of pain killers, posits the legal and regulated growth of poppies in Afghanistan to meet that need. Since it's virtually the only source of income for the entire nation, this plan would be one way to give farmers a far more compelling choice: the drug lords with their evil ways or dealing with the government buying poppies at a competitive price for use as medicine.

"...even if we paid exactly what the drug lords do, the entire crop would cost only about \$600 million - less than the \$780 million the United States planned to spend on eradication in Afghanistan this year.

"Besides, eradication efforts have never eliminated a drug crop. Cocaine continues to be widely available, despite the roughly \$3 billion that the United States has spent on coca eradication in Colombia over the last five years. And that is only the most recent example.

"India's thriving generic drug industry suggests that there is plenty of money to be made in the marketing of generic pain relievers. But even if returns are modest, generating any profit at all is better than stamping out the major driver of an unstable country's economy. Legal products are also safer and easier to regulate than illegal drugs....

"But think of it this way: what's an easier sell with farmers, hard cash now or pesticide spraying and potentially empty promises of economic assistance? Few Afghans begrudge farmers' efforts to feed their families - but many would turn against greedy planters who continued supplying drug lords despite adequate alternatives."



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