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## Commentary on the Investigation: The April 20, 2001 Peruvian Shootdown Accident

Editor

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**Abstract.** This article critiques an investigative report officially intended (1) to establish the facts and circumstances contributing to the April 20, 2001 interdiction of a United States (US) missionary floatplane and the death of two US citizens and (2) to make recommendations to minimize another such accident. The report was issued by the US Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

A joint US-Peru program to deter and, if necessary, interdict airborne illicit drug operations ended in the shootdown of an aircraft supporting religious missionary activity and in the death of two US citizens related to this missionary activity. The theology of illicit drugs as Satan brought death and destruction to supporters of another theology contra Satan.

Although one might employ this accident in advocacy against the joint US-Peru program and even against the il-legalization of drugs, one might also read the US State Department investigative report bearing on the accident to seek better implementation of the program and "the war against drugs." Such readers might be as disappointed at what is in the report's six main conclusions as what is left out. The most significant lacuna seems to be the absence of the political.

**Conclusion #1.** Program procedures described in implementing documents became less detailed and explicit between the 1994 governmental agreement and the time of the shootdown. Response. Political factors may well have induced wordsmithing for easier reading by bureaucratic authorities hardpressed for time; time pressure for final versions of documents dictated by the political and personal needs of bureaucratic authorities; and the intent to minimize political accountability in case anything went wrong and to finesse political issues pertaining to whom would be responsible for what would, in turn, maintain political support for the program.

**Conclusion #2.** Program training focused on actions that would be effected after an aircraft would be identified as transporting illicit drugs and on safety factors among program air assets--not between these assets and putative drug-carrying aircraft. Response. A cardinal political factor may well have included the lack of reliable and valid profiling indicators that would have differentiated drug-carrying from non-drug-carrying aircraft with statistically and politically acceptable accuracy and error rates. Another may have included the political pressure to look like the program was successful or having an effect. With an unknowable base rate of illicit drug flights, numbers of forcedowns and shootdowns could yield significant political mileage. On the other hand, the bureaucratic tendency to satisfice a system by having zero forcedowns and shootdowns but a large number of air sorties would be contraindicated by an inevitably "greater-than-zero" number of safety incidents just among program aircraft. Yet another factor may have been the politically nurtured macho image of interceptor pilots that would have lowered the threshold for effected interception.

**Conclusion #3.** Key participants in the April 20 shootdown narrowly viewed their operational roles and "did not individually consider their actions from a broader, overall perspective." Response. A political factor reinforcing such a view may well have included a very significant characteristic of political control

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of military, paramilitary, and law enforcement operations. This control strongly dictates a very narrow, by-the-book approach to rules of engagement disengaged from a broader socio-cultural and political context. This control also nurtures a training perspective wherein overlearned responses are highly valued--again disengaged from a broader context.

Conclusion #4. Despite strong indications that the missionary aircraft was not engaged in illicit drug trafficking, it was perceived as engaged in the latter. Response. There is significant politics both in what the conclusion denotes and the conclusion itself. As to the latter, the conclusion smacks of ex post facto analysis because the indicators of what might look like missionary, non-drug, and drug-related activity are problematic. (See Conclusion #2). As to the former, Conclusions #2 and #3 would suggest that what looks like a drug-carrying aircraft will be identified as such an aircraft, while what looks like a missionary or other non-drug aircraft still will be identified as a drug-carrying aircraft via intermediary inferences such as the putative presence of adversary deceptive practices.

Conclusion #5. Language limitations--exacerbated in a stressful situation--among US and Peruvian program participants deleteriously affected information flow, processing, and comprehension. Response. A political factor might well have included personnel criteria about the need for bilingualism in combined operations interacting with nationalism, ethnocentrism, chauvinism, and jingoism.

Conclusion #6. Communications systems overload and "cumbersome procedures" contributed to impeding compliance with applicable directives. Response. As Conclusion # 1 suggests, international and domestic politics may well have impeded the mindset ensuring compatibility among communications systems, procedures, and directives.

In conclusion, the US State Department report focuses on discrete and seemingly dysfunctional intrapsychic and behavioral contributors to the April 20 shutdown. As is the case with aviation accident investigations in general, the report does not focus on political contributors to these contributors--a lack of focus that renders the report very political indeed. (See Cullen, S.A. (1998). *Aviation suicide: A review of general aviation accidents in the U.K., 1970-96*. *Aviation, Space, & Environmental Medicine*, 69, 6969-698; O'Hare, D., Wiggins, M., Batt, R., & Morrison, D. (1994). *Cognitive failure analysis for aircraft accident investigation*. *Ergonomics*, 37, 1855-1869; Symer, C.J. (1999). *Impact of silence: A discourse analysis of black box miscommunications of three fatal flights*. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: the Sciences & Engineering*, 60(1-B), 0400; U.S. Department of State. (August 2, 2001). *Peru investigation report: The April 20, 2001 Peruvian shutdown accident*. [http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2001/08/peru\\_shutdown.html](http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2001/08/peru_shutdown.html); Yanowitch, R.E., Mohler, S.R., & Nichols, E.A. (1972). *The psychosocial reconstruction inventory: A postdictal instrument in aircraft accident investigation*. *FAA Office of Aviation Medicine Reports*, 72-25.)(Keywords: Illicit Drug, Peru.)