

## White House [OMB] Report Stings Drug Agency on Abilities

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 4, 2003

In an unusually harsh critique of an agency with a strong global reputation, the White House has questioned the ability of the Drug Enforcement Administration to stem the flow of narcotics and is threatening to give the agency its smallest budget increase in 15 years.

The agency "is unable to demonstrate progress in reducing the availability of illegal drugs in the United States," the Office of Management and Budget wrote in an assessment released this week as part of the budget plan. The agency lacks clear long-term strategies and goals, its managers are not held accountable for problems, and its financial controls do not comply with federal standards, the review found.

The findings raise uncertainties for the agency at a time when Washington expects it to enlarge its antidrug role. That is because the F.B.I. is moving 400 agents off drug cases to terrorism, and the drug agency is being asked to pick up the slack.

Officials at the agency and its parent, the Justice Department, said the agency was working to address many of the concerns in the report. They said the report was more a reflection of the agency's failure to communicate its successes than its ability to fight drug trafficking.

"It's not that we're doing things wrong or we've been ineffective," a spokesman, Will Glaspay, said. "It's more that we just need to do a better job of defining our accomplishments."

Officials at the agency pointed to a growing number of seizures for some types of drugs along with the reduced purity of street drugs as evidence of their success in squeezing suppliers out of business.

Critics say that drug purity has increased and that drugs have become easier to buy than ever before. President Bush acknowledged in his report on drug strategy for 2002 that use among young people was at "unacceptably high levels" and that "in recent years we have lost ground" in reducing illegal use.

The report on the agency was one of 234 that the Office of Management and Budget completed for 20 percent of the programs and agencies as it tries for the first time to assign standards and criteria to budget review.

Officials stressed that the criticisms were not uncommon. Like the agency, half the programs reviewed received overall ratings of "results not demonstrated."

Still, the severity of the report on the drug agency caught law enforcement officials off guard because of the agency's prominence, size and generally solid reputation in fighting trafficking. Unlike sister agencies like the F.B.I. and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the drug agency has largely avoided major scandals and calls for reform from members of Congress. It has enjoyed generally strong support on Capitol Hill, and its former director, Asa Hutchinson, who left last week to join the Homeland Security Department, was popular among conservatives in Congress.

With that support, the agency has seen its budget more than double since 1995, according to the Justice Department. But in the White House budget released on Monday, the financing is to remain essentially flat at \$1.56 billion.

Its growth of less than 1 percent is dwarfed by increases in financing at other law enforcement agencies of 10 percent or more. Mr. Glaspy said it represented the smallest increase for the agency since 1988.

The performance assessments for the drug agency and other bureaus "were one factor, but clearly not the only factor in funding decisions," said Trent Duffy, a spokesman for the White House on the budget.

The overarching concern in financing law enforcement, officials said, is the need to make counterterrorism the top priority. The Bush administration has sought to link drug use to the threat of terrorism, and other Justice Department drug enforcement programs received proposed increases of up to 10 percent in the budget. But the drug agency will be asked to scale back spending in areas like community enforcement even as it seeks to add agents on the street, officials said.

"When you're fighting a war against terrorism, there is not an infinite amount of money to go around," an official at the Justice Department said. "We are putting significant funds into the war against drugs. But we have to be realistic as to what we can afford."

Critics said the critique of the agency was long overdue and could start a debate about how the war on drugs is working.

"The emperor has no clothes," said Eric F. Sterling, the president of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation in Silver Spring, Md., and a specialist on drug enforcement. The White House report "should really shake up our national revelry with drug enforcement and generate a major re-evaluation of our antidrug efforts."

Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, a group in New York that promotes alternative policies, said he was "pleasantly surprised" by the findings.

"Typically," Mr. Nadelmann said, "the D.E.A. has gotten a pretty free ride. Nobody was really held to account for the issue of reducing overall drug use. But this suggests some measure of seriousness about actually putting in a set of real criteria."

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