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PROGRAM 20/20

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SUBJECT War on Drugs

ANNOUNCER: This is a simulated war game. Tonight, Geraldo Rivera poses as a smuggler to test the government's new defenses in the war on drugs. Military aircraft, ships, more agents, sophisticated equipment. Can he get through? How strong is the second front?

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HUGH DOWNS: Up-front tonight. There hasn't been anything like it since Prohibition, the Reagan Administration's war on drugs. Under the direct supervision of the Vice President, federal law enforcement agencies are putting aside their traditional rivalries and are working together, now with the military, in a special task force. Just today, news of two drug seizures: 3 1/2 tons of marijuana intercepted in this small sailboat, here being escorted into New York Harbor; and more than 800 pounds of cocaine seized from a small private plane at Montgomery, Alabama. Both seizures the work of the new task force.

But how often do the smugglers get through? Well, to test the effectiveness of the new drug task force, Geraldo Rivera tried to break through its net.

Geraldo, are you going to explain now how that came out?

GERALDO RIVERA: I don't want to give away the end of the story yet, Hugh. It'd spoil the suspense. But the reality is drug smuggling today is a multibillion-dollar industry. And the smugglers working the drug industry are often better informed, equipped, and financed than the cops trying to catch them.

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The first front in the new drug war is the escalating effort to stop the stuff from getting into the country. But there are other ways to skin the drug fat cats, like going after their money. And that's what's really new. That's the second front.

When the Reagan Administration declared war on drugs, they meant it, literally. For really the first time, the military is now intensely involved. Using sophisticated equipment like this Navy P-3 sub hunter, one recent case involved tracking down a drug ship called the Alex.

For the last several months, the ship has allegedly been cruising up and down the entire East Coast of the country, off-loading drugs onto smaller vessels, like some huge floating drug warehouse. The search for the Alex is typical of operations that happen now almost daily. It involves Coast Guard cutters, swift sleek Navy hydrofoils that can cruise at over 50 miles an hour, and a Navy destroyer, the Issac Kidd, which actually apprehended the drug-runner 400 miles off the Florida coast. It had 80,000 pounds of marijuana on board.

Retired Admiral Dan Murphy coordinates the Administration's anti-drug effort.

ADMIRAL DAN MURPHY: What we're trying to do throughout the entire country is to apply what lessons we learned in Florida. And this is deploying Navy radar planes off either coast, using a balloon radar down here in Key West, Coast Guard ships, Navy ships, all kinds of airplanes, and trying to catch these bad guys both on the surface of the ocean and in the air as they come in.

VICE PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH: Marijuana seizures are up 23 percent. Cocaine seizures are up 54 percent.

RIVERA: Are you stopping the drugs coming in or are you merely diverting them from South Florida? That's the question.

VICE PRESIDENT BUSH: I think we're doing both. Some have been diverted. But I think if you just took a net assessment, you'd find that we'd deterred drugs coming in. And the hits are up. But we're fighting a major problem with somewhat restricted resource. But it's sure been worth it and we're going to keep plugging away. We've got a national problem and this is a national answer. And we hope it'll prove successful.

RIVERA: As just one test of how successful the Vice President's task force is or may become, we agreed, with the cooperation of federal authorities, to play a little war game. Under the rules of this war game, I would pose as a drug smuggler

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attempting to break through the net cast by the Vice President's task force around this Florida coast.

To make the game as realistic as possible, our side would be flying in a Beechcraft D-18. It's a 30-year-old airplane currently favored by drug smugglers.

To assist me in the planning and carrying out of this operation, 20/20 enlisted the help of two, shall we say, consultants, men who have intimate knowledge of real-life drug smuggling operations. We rendezvoused on a remote airfield in South Florida.

So, Charlie, how long have you been in the business?

CHARLIE: About 10 or 11 years.

RIVERA: How long have you been flying?

CHARLIE: About 50 years.

RIVERA: Fifty years.

How about you, Bob? How long in the business?

BOB: [Unintelligible] years.

RIVERA: How good are these new methods of aerial surveillance, Charlie?

CHARLIE: The industry has to take a lot of precautions in order to beat 'em, but it can be done.

RIVERA: The industry Charlie is referring to is, of course, the nation's drug-smuggling business, an \$80-billion-a-year colossus that has learned every trick in the book.

Why don't we go and take off, fly over the Bahamas there, and we'll see if they can catch us.

To give the Feds a fair chance, there were ground rules for this little exercise.

All right, this is the game were going to play, trying to beat the South Florida task force. We're going to come in from Orange Cay in the Bahamas low to the water to avoid the radar.

The task force knew approximately how, when and where we would attempt to penetrate a 30-mile slice of the South Florida coastline between Biscayne Bay and Key Largo.

MAN: Between there and the north tip of Elliott Key is the penetration point. Minimum altitude, 2000 feet. So, hopefully, C-3 can snap up on him.

RIVERA: These task force pilots had, in essence, a tip about our mission, something they frequently get in real-life smuggling ventures.

Incidentally, this entire exercise was part of their regular training schedule.

Ultimately, our goal is to get to Homestead general airfield, right here. Rick will be flying in the pilot's seat. This satchel will represent the narcotics we're smuggling into the country. We win the game if we can get this satchel on the ground at Homestead airfield not surrounded by federal narcotics agents.

MAN: Once he gets into the massive amount of air traffic, Jesus, you know, we can find a airplane, but is it the airplane?

RIVERA: These agents are all former military pilots with thousands of hours of flying experience. And because so much smuggled dope is coming in by air these days, the pilots are an essential part of the task force net.

Another footnote. To avoid accidental injury to this correspondent, at our request, the agents removed the bullets from their weapons.

In contrast to our 30-year-old prop-driven D-18 smuggler special, the task force uses specially-equipped converted business jets for their mission.

Among the exotic electronics on board, these aircraft are equipped with infrared scanners capable of finding distant targets in day or night. On this flight, they also use their classified radar system. Designed initially for aerial combat, the system can find the altitude, speed and direction of another aircraft, then plot the course and time of intercept, as it did in locating and catching up with this Coast Guard jet flying an actual anti-drug mission. In short, these are formidable tools of law enforcement. Fortunately for the crooks, the task force has just one of these jets operating in South Florida.

The reason we chose the Bahamas as the place to begin our challenge should become obvious when you see the airfield on Bimini Island. This is a major drug transshipment point into the United States. The wrecked planes that litter the street at Bimini are evidence of smuggling operations that did not make it.

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MAN: That guy was loaded with dope.

RIVERA: But would we make it?

All right. We're at Orange Cay in the Bahamas. From here on we'll be flying at an altitude of about 20 feet, trying to penetrate into the United States. The game is on.

MAN: This guy here is doing about 160 knots. That could be him. That could be an 18.

MAN: Rog. Let's get on him. He looks like a D-18.

RIVERA: These agents, by the way, knew we were flying a D-18.

MAN: It should be a lot faster this time. He looks like he's going right past that, and it just might be our own guy. He's going right past that doggone boat.

RIVERA: It wasn't the wrong guy, it was us. Thirty miles off the coast and after just ten minutes, they had spotted our low-flying airplane.

But finding us was one thing, catching us another.

Bob, I think they've spotted us.

MAN: The target is on the deck, on the deck. And we did not ID him. We did not ID him. However, it is a tan and white, tan and white, a D-18 with a long nose.

MAN: Definitely a D-18. Definitely a D-18. Alert [unintelligible] on that.

RIVERA: Spotted and now being tailed by two different aircraft, we began evasive maneuvers just 20 feet above the Atlantic Ocean.

MAN: I'm getting a heat reflection off the water from him. So he's got to be low.

MAN: Our commander's down there with him.

MAN: I know. I had the commander a minute ago. But this guy is juking and jiving.

RIVERA: What are we going to do?

PILOT: We're going under that thunderstorm, get in the heavy rain, and then make turns back and forth, see if we can lose them. No way you can lose them out here.

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RIVERA: But even before we got to the clouds, there was more bad news in the rear-view mirror, a high-performance Blackhawk helicopter donated by the Army to the task force. It's additional evidence of the military's escalating involvement in the drug war.

MAN: If he goes in the clouds, just break away, and I'll just take over.

RIVERA: As the federal noose got tighter, we tried the clouds on for cover.

MAN: I do not have him on radar.

MAN: He's in it, and we're scooting right along below it, and we broke left.

MAN: Okay. I've got him at 12 o'clock. He's off to your right side.

MAN: We have got him.

RIVERA: It didn't help. We just couldn't shake the 200-mile-an-hour helicopter.

MAN: One-eight, fall in behind 521.

RIVERA: The Customs helicopter is right on our tail.

There was only one gambit left.

PILOT: All right. They're right behind us. Our only chance is to make a run for it. So I'll take the satchel as soon as the wheels stop and see if I can outrun them.

MAN: Oh, they're turning around. They're running.

MAN: There's a guy rabbiting.

MAN: Some guy running.

RIVERA: But that didn't work for the crew of my airplane, or for me. And though I was on the losing side, this training mission was an impressive demonstration of federal muscle.

But as potentially effective as the Vice President's task force seems to be, even this type of combined effort can't possibly prevent all drugs from being smuggled into the country. By the government's own best estimate, just 10 to 15 percent is actually being stopped. So they're opening a second front in

the drug war, going after the property of the drug smugglers.

Homestead airfield, for example, is cluttered with aircraft intercepted and seized in actual task force operations. Now, if the government can prove these planes were used for, or even if they were just bought with money earned from, the drug trade, then they'll be confiscated. In other words, the planes will become the property of the United States. Within just the last year, the federal law enforcement agencies have seized a total of 229 aircraft, and one of them belonged to our old friend Charlie.

What were you carrying when they grabbed you?

CHARLIE: We had about 79 bales of marijuana on board.

RIVERA: Seventy-nine bales of marijuana.

CHARLIE: Yes. It weighed about 1550 pounds.

RIVERA: Charlie was never charged for his role in the smuggling caper because he managed to convince federal authorities that he was actually a double agent, an informer working for the government. So he expects to get his plane back any day now.

The owners of these other aircraft, though, will not be as lucky.

Some of the property seized by the Federal Government for its alleged connection with the drug trade is quite substantial, both in terms of value and size. This 707 jet cargo plane, for instance, belonging to a company called Tampa Colombia. It was seized by Customs agents on June 11th after they found about 900 pounds of cocaine hidden in a cargo of flowers. This is the second aircraft belonging to the same company to be seized within about the last year. The last one they took down had about 4000 pounds of coke on board.

STANLEY MARCUS: It's a good and effective tool because what it does is it increases the cost to a narcotics dealer of doing narcotics business.

RIVERA: Stanley Marcus, the U.S. Attorney for South Florida, is aggressively using the laws on forfeiture to increase the dopers' cost of doing business.

MARCUS: So, for example, on a Monday morning 50 or 80 defendants might be arrested in connection with a major narcotics smuggling operation. And at the same time, we will proceed civilly against 26 automobiles, seven boats, 15 aircraft, two

pieces of real property, three condominiums, and 11 bank accounts.

RIVERA: So it would seem as if the government finally has a potent practical weapon to fight the money-rich drug smugglers. But are the confiscation laws really effective?

REP. JACK BROOKS: When they seize vessels or cars or airplanes, they just let 'em sit around and they don't do anything with them. Then they sell 'em for little or nothing, 40 or 50 percent off of the appraised value.

RIVERA: Congressman Brooks' main point is that better management of these seized assets could make the entire anti-drug effort even more effective.

When cash is seized or property sold, under a pending proposal, the agency that made the seizure would be able to keep the proceeds or property instead of having to turn them over to the Treasury.

So you mean that if the task force, for example, seizes a vessel, it can sell that vessel and then use that money in its efforts.

REP. BROOKS: That's right. That's right. Subject to congressional supervision.

RIVERA: But some are skeptical that even a well-run program will really have an impact on the big-time smugglers. Defense attorney Joel Hirshhorn has gotten rich successfully defending accused drug smugglers.

JOEL HIRSHHORN: When a professional organized smuggler loses an \$800,000 plane, like a Learjet, if that's what they cost, or loses a house that he might have spent a quarter of a million dollars for or loses a three or four hundred thousand dollar boat, that's just a cost of doing business. It's written off as if you might write off the cost of lunch today.

RIVERA: One way to up the ante has been proposed by Senator Joe Biden.

SENATOR JOE BIDEN: If you're a drug dealer and I can prove that you gained a million dollars -- that is, you benefited to the tune of a million dollars, all I have to do, under the new Biden proposal, is to go out and anything that you have that's worth a million dollars, the government can take.

RIVERA: Biden's proposal is called substitute assets. And if upheld by the courts, it could prove effective against the

wealthy drug syndicates.

Aside from the obvious risk of going to jail or having property seized and forfeited to the government, there is another cost of business for drug smugglers. You're about to see the price of betrayal.

MAN: ...the bogey now down to 110 knots, 3000.

RIVERA: It's a moonless Florida night. The lights you see on your TV screen are the infrared image of a smuggler's airplane as seen from one of the task force aircraft. The voices belong to the task force pilots. The smuggler, circling a remote Florida airstrip, is waiting for his associates on the ground to light up the field.

MAN: There's a big field down there with three hot spots in it. They're signals on the ground, two fires.

MAN: This is Eddie. He's going in, Ben.

RIVERA: Desperately low on fuel, the smuggler does not realize he's being followed and tracked by the task force aircraft flying above him. But his associates on the ground do hear the other engines. And to save their own skins, they turn off the landing lights.

MAN: The light just went out.

MAN: ...they probably heard us up here and turned the light out.

MAN: Okay. He's at 300 feet, 110 knots.

MAN: He's got to go in anyway. He's out of fuel. We might see somebody die here.

RIVERA: The smuggler pilot has no choice. Betrayed but out of fuel, he attempts to set his plane down anyway.

MAN: I'm not going to try to maneuver with him here because there's just too much crap going on.

MAN: He crashed. He crashed. He just crashed.

MAN: Did he crashed.

MAN: He's crashed. He's crashed. There's the fireball. There's the fireball.

This is five-zero. I've got no visible survivors on my

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gadget. The plane did break apart on impact. I'll tell you, there's no chance for survivors.

RIVERA: This was the scene the next morning. Perhaps, as Vice President Bush has said, the color of drug money is not green. It's blood-red.

DOWNS: Can they ever really stop illicit drug traffic without legalizing drugs?

RIVERA: I really don't think so, Hugh. I think that you can slow it down, make it more expensive. But as long as millions of Americans are willing to spend billions of dollars, then someone's going to try and take it in.