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Mexico’s Drug Wars Get Brutal

FRANCISCO E. GONZÁLEZ

Narco-violence has intensified in Mexico since the early 2000s as a consequence of the Mexican government’s crackdown on drug cartels. The spiral of violence has included shootouts on the public squares of big cities in broad daylight. A grenade attack on September 15, 2008, left eight dead and more than one hundred injured on the central square in Morelia (the capital of the state of Michoacán), on a night Mexicans were celebrating the 198th anniversary of their country’s independence. The mayhem has included a proliferation of mass executions discovered on isolated ranches in remote areas, as well as in homes in crowded neighborhoods of cities as different and distant as Tijuana, on the border with California, and Mérida, on the Yucatán peninsula.

For most Mexicans, rich and poor, a psychological leap into a state of generalized fear and a perception of acute vulnerability coincided with an increase in gruesome displays of barbarism since the spring of 2006. These acts have included public displays of battered human heads, some thrown into plazas or placed on car rooftops, some thrown outside schools; mutilated torsos hanging from meat hooks; threats and taunts to rival cartels written on walls with the blood of butchered adversaries; and video-postings of torture and beheadings on YouTube.

How did Mexico spiral into this horrific wave of violence? The export of illegal substances to the United States became big business during the Prohibition years (1917–1933), but the seeds for

the long-term growth and astounding profitability of the Mexico-US illegal drug trade were sown much earlier. Opiates (morphine and heroin) became a growing business in the United States in the wake of the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the two world wars (1914–1918 and 1939–1945). Since the nineteenth century, farmers in northwest Mexico had grown the opium poppies that satisfied part of this demand.

Mexico also became one of the ports of entry for cocaine. It was sold commercially and developed a mass market in the United States in the 1880s as a cure-all for everything from discolored teeth to flatulence. Smugglers from the Andean countries and their US networks used Mexico and the Caribbean as gateways to supply the illegal market that served Hollywood’s and New York’s glamorous sets in the 1950s and 1960s. Cocaine remained a luxury item that only the well-to-do could afford until the early 1980s, when crack cocaine invaded the streets of America’s large cities, wreaking havoc particularly in poor African-American and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Mexican seasonal migrant workers in the 1920s introduced to Americans the smoking of cannabis leaves. A mass market for cannabis consumption did not develop, however, until the rise of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Lastly, a mass market for synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines developed in the 1990s in the United States, and Mexican drug cartels became dominant suppliers of these too.

For decades Mexico and the United States have pursued very different antidrug strategies. The United States launched the original “war on drugs” under President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s. This policy contained both domestic and very prominent international components, explicitly targeting Mexico as a key site for the eradication of opium crops and marijuana, as well as

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the Andean countries for the eradication of coca. Successive Mexican governments, on the other hand, pursued what analysts have dubbed a “live and let live” approach. This system, characterized by a working relationship between some Mexican authorities and drug lords, prevailed between the 1940s and the 1990s.

This does not mean that Mexican presidents or most high-ranking bureaucrats, governors, and military high commanders were involved in the illegal drug trade. It does mean, however, that given Mexico's complex and fragmented territorial politics, the country's governors, mayors, military officers, and police chiefs retained some autonomy to advance their interests and those of their allies, including drug traffickers.

The kingpins bought access to the Mexico-US border, and this access allowed them to expand their production and smuggling activities. The authorities in turn stuffed their pockets with cash—but also, crucially, kept relative public peace and a semblance of law and order through the containment (rather than the destruction) of drug syndicates. Direct confrontation meant risking public disorder and violence, and indeed whenever authorities went after traffickers, bloody shootouts ensued. But such confrontations were the exceptions rather than the rule. For those involved on both sides of the game, mutually understood rules and practices prevailed. Authorities did not tolerate open turf wars among competing cartels, and they prohibited them from harming innocent civilians through extortion, kidnappings, or assassinations.

RISING VIOLENCE

Mexican authorities came under increased pressure from the United States to clamp down on drug cartels after the 1985 murder of an American Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officer. Enrique Camarena, a DEA agent working undercover in Mexico, had exposed big ranches in the state of Chihuahua where traffickers cultivated cannabis with the full knowledge of some federal authorities, military officers, and state and local officials. The traffickers captured and killed Camarena, and the discovery of his tortured, decomposing body created a furor in US public opinion. Footdragging by the authorities investigating the case convinced Americans that highly placed in-

dividuals in the government of President Miguel de la Madrid were involved with the traffickers.

By the time a new president, Carlos Salinas, expressed eagerness to join the United States in a free trade agreement in 1989, the Mexican government had to show that it was doing all it could to clean house. Salinas allowed DEA agents to return to work in Mexico and his government spent resources strengthening military and police operations against traffickers. In parallel, changes enacted under the administration of George H.W. Bush altered the long-standing equilibrium of the Mexico-US illegal drug trade. In 1989–90, Washington committed large-scale material resources, military training, and intelligence to try to bust the Andean cocaine trade. After years of engagement, the United States contributed to the demise of Colombia's main syndicates, the Medellín and Cali cartels, and to largely shutting down the Caribbean–Gulf of Mexico cocaine route. By the late 1990s, the battle lines had been redrawn and Mexico had ended up in the eye of the storm.

The demise of the Colombian cartels allowed the Mexican syndicates, which formerly had worked for the Colombians, to take over. The virtual closure of the Caribbean route strengthened the Central America–Mexico route by land and the Pacific Ocean

route toward Mexico's western coast. Despite official efforts by Salinas's successor, President Ernesto Zedillo, drug traffic increased in the late 1990s and some Mexican authorities continued to be on the drug lords' payroll. The most embarrassing instance was revealed in 1997, when Zedillo's drug czar, General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was exposed as a beneficiary of the top leader of the Juárez cartel. The confluence of higher spending by Mexican governments to combat drug trafficking and higher illegal drug flows through the country's territory set the stage for a serious increase in narco-violence in the late 1990s.

This increase in drug-related violence coincided in 2000 with the loss of the presidency by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) for the first time in Mexico's history. Vicente Fox, of the center-right National Action Party (PAN), assumed the presidency promising many changes, among them the defeat of the drug cartels. Some analysts think that even before Fox became president, PAN governments at the state and local levels in the

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early 1990s had pursued a more principled approach to combating drug trafficking, which had resulted in higher levels of drug-related violence in border states such as Baja California and Chihuahua. Fox purged and reorganized the federal police forces and tried to extradite captured drug lords to the United States.

This policy, though effective at raising the number of individuals arrested and drug shipments confiscated, fell far short of the government's objective of defeating the cartels. Moreover, the capture of some cartel leaders was tantamount to kicking hornets' nests without having the means to spray the rattled insects. The capture of Benjamín Arellano Félix, head of the Tijuana cartel, in 2002, and of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, head of the Gulf cartel, in 2003, led to a vicious war within and among the criminal organizations, as upcoming drug leaders battled to assert or reassert control over territory, resources, and manpower. The change in the balance of power among the cartels led to new alliances. The Gulf, Tijuana, and Juárez cartels struck deals to take on another bloc made up of the Sinaloa, Milenio, Jalisco, and Colima cartels.

Likewise, the reorganized police forces soon succumbed to the bribes and threats of the criminal syndicates. Government infiltration continued to such an extent that a spy for a drug cartel was discovered working in the president's office in 2005. Violence had gotten so out of control by 2004–05 that Fox implemented an operation involving 1,500 army and federal police officers in Mexico-US border cities. In this context, the conflict intensified and started mutating into the bloody spectacle that Mexicans witness today.

CALDERÓN'S WAR

Felipe Calderón, also from the PAN, took over the presidency from Fox on December 1, 2006. Calderón won a fiercely contested and extremely close election against the candidate of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Throughout the campaign, public opinion surveys had shown that Mexican citizens' top concerns were lack of economic opportunities, and crime and general insecurity. Shortly after assuming office, Calderón declared a war on drugs by deploying the Mexican military in a series of large-scale opera-

tions that by the end of 2008 had involved close to 40,000 troops and 5,000 federal police.

The decision to bring the armed forces into the fray was controversial, and observers disagreed about the reasons the president raised the stakes in this way, investing his political capital in the war on drugs. During the presidential campaign Calderón had not hinted that this policy would come to define his government.

Some analysts highlighted a political explanation, according to which weak incoming presidents in contemporary Mexico have to carry out spectacular acts early on to establish their authority, boost their standing with the public, and help gain some autonomy over groups within the Mexican political class that try to limit their scope of action. From this perspective, Calderón may have ordered the military surge against the drug cartels to "turn the page" on the then-raging postelectoral conflict with the PRD candidate. Given the contentious electoral results, López Obrador had declared himself the "legitimate"

president. Calderón's decisive action showed in effect who was the real commander-in-chief.

Other analysts have argued that the political explanation sounds like

a conspiracy theory. The main reason behind the military surge, they suggest, was the incoming administration's realization that the cartels were dominating more territory and public spaces and that if this process were left unchecked, it could lead to a situation of state failure similar to the one that Colombia had to endure. Also, according to this view, a war on drugs had existed in all but name during Fox's term. Given the ineffectiveness of police forces in combating the syndicates, Calderón was left without any option but to involve the military.

In fact these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Calderón might have decided to pursue a war on drugs given, first, genuine concern regarding the uncontrolled violence in parts of the country, including his home state of Michoacán; and, second, his wish to make the armed forces key allies in the context of the postelectoral conflict with López Obrador and the PRD. Regardless of the mix of motivations for launching the surge against traffickers, in the short term Calderón has reaped higher political than operational benefits. Opinion polls show that a majority of the Mexican

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public supports the president's stance against the cartels. By mid-2007, the postelectoral conflict and López Obrador's continuing maneuvers to discredit Calderón had disappeared from the headlines. But dominating the news instead has been a brutal intensification of drug-related violence.

THE CORRUPTION CONUNDRUM

Operationally, Calderón's war against drugs has already resulted in the arrests of more than a dozen top drug lords and record seizures of arms, cash, and drugs. Yet the campaign started as, and it remains, a steep uphill battle. The main conundrum is still the ineffectiveness of law enforcement in Mexico. Aside from questions of jurisdiction (Mexico's federal structure means that approximately 3,800 law enforcement institutions exist throughout the country), the root cause of the problem is the drug cartels' extensive penetration of government agencies and co-optation of government officials. This is a hurdle that is almost impossible to overcome without somehow depriving the drug lords of the astounding profits they currently make.

Indeed, the paradox of tougher enforcement is that, as the cost of doing business in the illegal drug trade rises, the street price of drugs goes up too, thereby raising profit margins. The result is that some drug traffickers and would-be traffickers may decide that pursuing this line of business is becoming prohibitively risky, but as long as profits from the trade remain so out of line compared with any other economic activity, there will always be individuals ready to risk their lives.

Studies of drug gang members in cities like Chicago have shown that only the "top dogs" make stratospheric profits, while most of the rank and file make so little that they have second and third jobs, while still living with their mothers! Yet, no matter how low the probability of making it to the top, individuals will take a chance on the dangers of the drug trade if their social conditions are precarious enough and their opportunities for advancement are negligible. And it goes without saying that conditions of hopelessness and extreme life choices abound in developing countries such as Mexico. As long as these conditions persist, and as long as the system put in place to counter the narcotics trade leads to the generation of exceptional profits, there will continue to be individuals willing to play this lottery.

The generation of exceptional profits, moreover, also provides the plentiful cash that drug

lords use to buy into the system. Only now are we realizing the extent to which top Mexican authorities are in the pay of the drug lords. Since at least the Camarena affair, and probably for much longer, Mexicans had assumed that the cartels had bought off some among the political elite. But never before have so many top ranking law enforcers been exposed as under Calderón. They have been exposed at the local, state, and federal levels, and have ranged from the lowliest privates among the ranks to the head of Mexico's Interpol office and the federal government's drug czar.

Even though many officials might refuse to collaborate with the drug cartels irrespective of the pecuniary gains on offer, the criminal syndicates also compel cooperation by issuing threats and sometimes carrying them out. The assassination in May 2008 of Edgar Millán Gómez, the acting chief of Mexico's federal police, allegedly in retribution for the arrest in January of one of the top leaders of the Sinaloa cartel, increased the sense of vulnerability even for those who go about their daily lives surrounded by bodyguards.

Fate did not help the government's cause when a small jet carrying Mexico's top law enforcement officials—including the interior secretary and Calderón's closest political ally, Juan Camilo Mouriño, as well as the country's antidrug prosecutor, José Luis Santiago Vasconcelos—crashed in downtown Mexico City on November 4, 2008, killing all on board. Even though official evidence has suggested that turbulence caused the accident, conspiracy theories have spread around Mexico, fueling the sense that the government has suffered another blow, this time at its core.

In the two years since the start of Calderón's war on drugs, the government has raised the stakes for the cartels by hitting them with full military force. The cartels have responded with an intensification of both their turf wars and their war against the Mexican state. As a result, drug-related violence has spread from states where it has been endemic for years into states that had not seen drug-related violence before. The number of dead almost doubled in just one year—from 2,700 in 2007 to more than 5,300 in 2008. Given the rising tide of violence and the mounting evidence of drug-related corruption at all levels of government, it is probably fair to say that, so far, the cartels have managed to take the lead in a psychological war against the Mexican state.

I noted earlier that Calderón's drug war has yielded higher short-term political than operation-

al benefits. However, some political implications of the war could have a big impact on the operational capacity for waging it. The most important of these political implications has been Calderón's ability to get the US government to accept that the war on drugs is a matter of co-responsibility. In effect, Calderón has managed to bring the United States into the eye of the storm.

WASHINGTON LENDS A HAND

Colombia receives the lion's share of US anti-narcotics aid in Latin America—this has been the case for several decades. But Calderón's declaration of a war on drugs in Mexico got the attention of President George W. Bush and the US Congress in 2007. As a result, a \$1.4 billion, three-year program, the Mérida Initiative, started operating in December 2008. The aim is to assist the Mexican government wage the war against drugs by helping it with technology and training.

There is no doubt that, in the case of Colombia, the agreement between Presidents Andrés Pastrana and Bill Clinton, which led to the creation of Plan Colombia in 2000, has proved a game changer. In the late 1990s, analysts and policy makers talked about Colombia as a potential failed state. Although the US Government Accountability Office has shown that Plan Colombia has not been a great success in terms of curbing the production of coca and the transportation of cocaine, it has undoubtedly strengthened the Colombian state and its capacity to strike against non-state actors, notably guerrillas and paramilitary groups. Colombia, which until recently possessed an underdeveloped military, has come a long way in eight years, and the central government's presence around the country's territory is stronger than ever.

These benefits have been very costly in some regards. Aerial fumigation to eradicate coca plants has damaged legal crops and produced adverse health effects in those exposed to the herbicides. The number of dead and displaced as a result of the intensification of the conflict since the early 2000s has grown enormously. News of extensive human rights violations has made headlines around the world. And yet, the plan's contribution to strengthening the state—and thereby to reestablishing a still precarious but nonetheless basic sense of security for many Colombians, particu-

larly in big cities—has meant that a substantial majority of that country's public favors the continuation of President Alvaro Uribe's policies, and of Colombia's cooperation with the United States.

What then for Mexico? There is danger in carrying the Colombia-Mexico analogy too far. After all, the United States does not share a border with Colombia, let alone a 2,000-mile one as it does with Mexico. For Mexico, the danger of an escalating war on drugs, with the United States helping to strengthen Mexican authorities' firepower, is that some of the extreme conditions created in Colombia since 2000 could be repeated. For the United States, the danger from such an escalation is potentially far greater than in its engagement with Colombia. An escalation of the war on drugs in Mexico could spill over into US territory. Indeed, an April 2008 report by the US National Drug Intelligence Center, part of the Department of Justice, found evidence of Mexican smuggling operations in all but two states (Vermont and West Virginia) of the union. Drug-related violence connected with the Mexican cartels has been increasingly reported in cities of the American southwest, from San Diego to Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Dallas.

Some analysts have gone so far as to start calling this a borderless war. This is no doubt an exaggeration. But there is also no doubt that unless US authorities can control the massive trafficking of weapons, cash, and chemical precursors of drugs that originate in the United States and are shipped into Mexico, America risks exposing its "soft underbelly," a term now often used to describe its southern border. As it is, some 90 percent of armaments confiscated from the cartels comes from the more than 7,000 gun outlets situated on US soil within 50 miles of the Mexican border.

The stakes for the United States in Mexico, thus, are much higher than they could ever be in Colombia. Supplying the Mexican government with technology and training to help prop up its fighting capabilities is an important first step, but it is not enough. Without seriously denting the demand for illegal drugs and preventing the southbound flow of weapons, cash, and drug-making chemicals, the United States will keep feeding the flames that threaten to consume the basis for civilized life in Mexico. ■