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Mexico Is Becoming the Next Colombia

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

Mexico is a major source of heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine for the U.S. market as well as the principal transit and distribution point for cocaine coming in from South America. For years, people both inside and outside Mexico have worried that the country might descend into the maelstrom of corruption and violence that has long plagued the chief drug-source country in the Western Hemisphere, Colombia. There are growing signs that the “Colombianization” of Mexico is now becoming a reality.

That tragic prospect is a direct result of Washington’s policy of drug prohibition. A prohibitionist strategy inherently creates a huge black-market premium for trafficking in illegal drugs. The enormous potential profit also attracts the most violence-prone criminal elements. It is a truism that when drugs are outlawed, only outlaws will traffic in drugs.

If Mexico goes down the same path as Colombia, the consequences for the United States will be much more severe. Colombia is relatively far away, but Mexico shares a border with the United States and is closely linked to this country economically through the North America Free Trade Agreement. Chaos in Mexico is already spilling over the border and will adversely impact the United States—especially the southwestern states.

There is still time for Mexico to halt and eventually reverse the Colombianization process, but for that to occur Washington must make dramatic policy changes. For more than three and a half decades, the United States has pursued a vigorous war on drugs that has produced major social pathologies both here and abroad. It is time to rethink the entire prohibitionist strategy.

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Introduction

For many years, U.S. anti-drug policy in the Western Hemisphere has concentrated on eradicating illegal drugs flowing out of the principal drug-source countries: Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia.¹ Washington was especially concerned about Colombia, where radical left-wing insurgent groups used the drug trade to finance their armed struggle against the government in Bogotá. Washington's nightmare scenario was the emergence of a narco-trafficking state allied with extremist political elements and terrorist organizations. The Bush administration seems to be sufficiently worried about that possibility that it intends to continue America's extensive anti-narcotics aid to Bogotá for several more years.

The fears about Colombia are not unfounded, although the government of President Alvaro Uribe has successfully weakened the principal insurgent groups in recent years. In any case, U.S. policymakers have a serious problem brewing much closer to home—in Mexico. The prominence of the drug trade in Mexico has mushroomed over the past decade. As far back as 1999, Thomas Constantine, then head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, told Congress that the power of Mexican drug traffickers had grown “virtually geometrically” over the previous five years and that corruption throughout the country was “unparalleled.”² Matters have grown substantially worse since his testimony.

Mexico is now a major source of heroin for the U.S. market as well as the principal transit and distribution point for cocaine coming in from South America.³ Indeed, there is evidence that Mexican drug organizations have leveraged the profits they earned from managing the delivery routes for their Colombian partners over the years to wrest control of the overall trade from the Colombians. “Today, the Mexicans have taken over and are running the organized crime, and getting the bulk of the money,” contends John Walters, director of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (the White House drug czar).⁴ Indeed, there are

indications that Mexican drug cartels are even playing a greater role in the South American drug-source countries themselves, increasingly displacing Colombian traffickers.⁵

People both inside and outside Mexico have begun to worry that the country may descend into the maelstrom of corruption and violence that has long plagued Colombia. Indeed, Mexicans now openly speak of the “Colombianization” of their country.⁶

True, Mexico does not face a large-scale radical political insurgency like that afflicting Colombia. The absence of such an insurgency is an important difference because it means that there are no significant anti-American political forces that can exploit the illegal drug trade for revenues to fund their cause. Nevertheless, the similarities between the situations in Colombia and Mexico are greater than the differences, and Washington has been slow to react to that troubling reality.

Shifting Alliances and a Spike in Violence

One consequence of the increased prominence of the Mexican cartels is a spike in violence. Although there are nearly a dozen drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico, four groups are especially powerful: the Gulf cartel headed by Osiel Cárdenas; the Sinaloa cartel run by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán; the Tijuana cartel, which for many years has been run by the Arellano Félix family; and the Juárez cartel headed by Vicente Carrillo. Those groups battle law enforcement agencies and one another for control of the access corridors to the lucrative U.S. market.

During the past year, there have been indications that the Gulf and Tijuana cartels have joined forces to battle the Sinaloa cartel, which had been attempting to expand its share of the trafficking business. To a lesser extent, the new allies have also fought to resist incursions by the Juárez cartel.⁷ The turf battles have been ferocious. On one especially bloody day in February, the bodies of 12 men were found in clusters along an 80-mile stretch of highway in

the state of Sinaloa between the capital, Culiacán, and the well-known beach resort of Mazatlán.⁸ The Sinaloa episode may have been extreme, but hundreds of individuals have perished in less spectacular incidents of violence related to drug trafficking during 2005. And there is no sign that the pace of the carnage is lessening.

The principal hit men for the various cartels have increasingly come from a onetime elite force in Mexico's military, the Special Air Mobile Force. Those ex-military renegades, known as the Zetas, were originally sent to the border with the United States to combat drug trafficking. Instead, many of them became assassins for the cartels.⁹ Mary Anastasia O'Grady, editor of the *Wall Street Journal's* Americas column, describes the tactics of the Zetas. Noting that they are often involved in execution-style slayings of traffickers from rival organizations, O'Grady emphasizes that they have other functions and serve a larger purpose.

The Zetas are also known for their intimidation of police and city officials and extortion practices against local businesses. Their success depends heavily on terrorizing the population, which explains why slayings have now become very public events. Such brutality demonstrates that compliance with the drug traffickers is not always a matter of greed. It can also be a matter of survival for public officials and their families.¹⁰

That pattern bears an eerie resemblance to the situation in Colombia—especially during the peak of drug-related violence in the late 1980s and the 1990s. There, too, intimidation was a key goal of the cartels, and they were all too successful. For example, a succession of Colombian governments evaded U.S. demands for the extradition of drug kingpins. The trafficking cartels had made it clear that thwarting extradition was a high priority and that lawmakers or other officials who defied them on that issue risked incurring a death sentence.

The Nuevo Laredo Fiasco

The worst instance of both violence and corruption in Mexico appears to exist in the northern border city of Nuevo Laredo, a metropolis of 350,000 across the Rio Grande from Laredo, Texas. Of the 850 killings over the past year that Mexican authorities attribute to drug-trafficking violence, 228 have taken place in Nuevo Laredo or the surrounding state of Tamaulipas.¹¹ The level of violence—and the level of police corruption—reached the point in early June that Mexico's national government suspended the entire Nuevo Laredo police force and sent in the federal police to patrol the streets.¹² For President Vicente Fox's administration, the final straw came when Nuevo Laredo's new police chief was assassinated on June 8, just hours after his appointment.¹³

Federal authorities proceeded to purge the city's police force. After being required to take polygraph exams, 305 of the 765 police officers were dismissed. Indeed, 41 of them were arrested for attacking the federal police when those units arrived in the city. The "new and improved" Nuevo Laredo police were put back on the streets in late July, wearing new uniforms with white shirts. White was chosen deliberately, according to Mexican federal authorities, to demonstrate that they were a trustworthy new entity.¹⁴ Those officials apparently were serious.

Aside from the considerable doubt that the purge of the local police would have any lasting benefit, the federal takeover of law enforcement had no meaningful impact on the violence in Nuevo Laredo. Indeed, the number of drug-related killings actually went *up* during that period.

The situation has remained extremely violent since the restoration of the local police force. "There really is a feeling that you can get away with murder in Nuevo Laredo," Michael Yoder, the U.S. consul general in Nuevo Laredo, said in mid-August.¹⁵ Tony Garza, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, closed the consulate in Nuevo Laredo for a week in late July

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following an especially violent incident in which rival drug-trafficking gangs engaged in a shootout using high-powered rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and bazookas.¹⁶

Spreading Corruption

The fiasco with the Nuevo Laredo police is just one indication of the mounting corruption within Mexico's political and law enforcement systems. Several of the most egregious episodes of violent drug-turf struggles, including one in and around the popular resort city of Cancún, have involved present or former police officers. In March 2005, prosecutors charged 27 state, federal, and local police in Cancún with running a drug ring or aiding in the murder of fellow police officers.¹⁷ In another case, a state police commander and 12 other officers in the state of Chihuahua were arrested in connection with the killing of 11 people near Ciudad Juárez. "Instead of protecting and guaranteeing the safety of the population, they are openly working with organized crime," said Mexico's deputy attorney general.¹⁸

There have been numerous similar episodes of police involvement in the drug trade over the past decade or so. In February 2000, Tijuana's police chief was assassinated—the second such assassination in less than six years. A short time later, seven men, including two former members of the Tijuana police force, were arrested for the chief's killing. The men confessed to working for the Sinaloa cartel. In another incident, a bloody gun battle ensued in downtown Tijuana when police attempted to stop a drug trafficker's armed motorcade. The commander of the police unit and three officers were killed by the trafficker's bodyguards. Those bodyguards, it turned out, were local police officers.¹⁹

The Fox government has made a serious effort to crack down on police who have been co-opted by the drug cartels. More than 700 officers have been charged with offenses ranging from taking bribes from the cartels to drug-related kidnapping and murder. In

one of the most high-profile cases, the former state police chief in Ciudad Juárez is under investigation for murder.²⁰ Yet most knowledgeable observers believe that those arrested represent only the tip of a very big iceberg of corruption.

Such corruption is not a new phenomenon under the Fox administration. More than a decade ago, the national police commander was caught with \$2.4 million in the trunk of his car. Later he was convicted of giving more than \$20 million to another government official to buy protection for one of Mexico's most notorious drug lords.²¹ Perhaps the most embarrassing incident occurred in the mid-1990s when President Ernesto Zedillo appointed General José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo to be Mexico's new drug czar. The general seemed to have excellent drug-fighting credentials, having personally led a much-publicized raid against the head of the Sinaloa cartel. U.S. officials greeted Gutiérrez Rebollo's appointment enthusiastically. U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey gushed with praise: "He has a reputation for impeccable integrity. . . . He's a deadly serious guy."²² Three months later, the Mexican government announced that its new drug czar was in a maximum security prison, charged with taking bribes and protecting the nation's largest drug trafficker. The general had indeed been tough on drug trafficking—tough, that is, on organizations that competed with his patron's cartel.

The passage of years has done little to reduce the corruption of Mexico's military. In April 2003, for example, three military officers, including a brigadier general, were convicted of accepting bribes from one of the cartels to protect drug shipments heading into the United States.²³ That episode was relatively minor, though, compared with one that occurred the previous year. In October 2002, more than 600 members of the army's 65th infantry battalion, headquartered in Sinaloa, were investigated for ties to drug-trafficking organizations and for protecting opium poppy and marijuana crops. The corruption problem was deemed so pervasive that the authorities dissolved the battalion.²⁴

Corruption clearly extends into the nation's prison system. Earlier this year, evidence came to light that some of the country's biggest drug kingpins were still running their organizations even while they were inmates in supposedly high-security prisons.²⁵ Indeed, according to U.S. and Mexican law enforcement officials, the struggle in Nuevo Laredo is being waged between the Sinaloa cartel's Guzmán (who escaped from a maximum security prison in 2001 in a laundry cart) and Cárdenas, the Gulf cartel boss, who is still behind bars in a prison near Mexico City.²⁶

The power of the drug organizations is generating fear throughout the country. There is concern that ruthless drug gangs may have targeted President Fox for assassination, and security around the president has had to be tightened.²⁷

It is not certain that any institution in Mexico has remained entirely uncontaminated by the drug trade. There are even allegations that the Catholic Church has willingly been the recipient of contributions from known drug traffickers. Just two years ago, the Fox government's investigation of money laundering included inquiries into the role of the Church. Cardinal Juan Sandoval of Guadalajara had his bank records subpoenaed during the course of the investigation.²⁸ Bishop Ramón Godínez, of the central state of Aguascalientes, caused an uproar in early October 2005 when he conceded that donations from traffickers were not unusual and argued that it was not the Church's responsibility to investigate the source of donations. "Just because the origin of the money is bad doesn't mean you have to burn it," Godínez said. "Instead, you have to transform it. . . ." The money, he said, was "purified" once it passed through the parish doors.²⁹

Impact on Americans

All of this is familiar to people who have studied the impact of the drug trade on Colombia over the past two decades. Another Colombian pattern also is beginning to emerge

in Mexico—the branching out of the drug gangs into kidnapping and other lucrative activities. That activity has made Colombia the kidnapping capital of the world in recent years. Now, the same phenomenon is becoming noticeable in Mexico. Indeed, some recent reports suggest that the kidnapping problem in Mexico may now be more severe than it is in Colombia.³⁰ A number of American citizens traveling in Mexico have been victimized.³¹ That danger reached such an alarming level that the U.S. Department of State issued a travel alert in January 2005 advising American visitors to exercise great caution when traveling in northern Mexico—much to the annoyance of the Mexican government.³²

U.S. officials already see signs that the drug-related violence in Mexico does not respect borders. According to drug czar John Walters, "The killing of rival traffickers is already spilling across the border. Witnesses are being killed. We do not think the border is a shield."³³ A Dallas narcotics officer reaches a similar conclusion: "We're seeing an alarming number of incidents involving the same type of violence that's become all too common in Mexico, right here in Dallas. We're seeing execution-style murders, burned bodies, and outright mayhem. . . . It's like the battles being waged in Mexico for turf have reached Dallas."³⁴ Even the normally sedate State Department's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* admits, "The violence of warring Mexican cartels has spilled over the border from Mexico to U.S. sites on the other side."³⁵ Perhaps most worrisome, there are indications that Zeta hit squads have moved across the border and are taking up residence in American cities, camouflaged by the burgeoning Hispanic immigrant communities.³⁶

The rising violence along the U.S.-Mexico border impelled both Arizona governor Janet Napolitano and New Mexico governor Bill Richardson to declare a state of emergency in mid-August 2005.³⁷ California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is under growing pressure from powerful political constituencies to do the same. True, drug-related vio-

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lence was not the only factor that led Napolitano and Richardson to take their actions; problems associated with the general influx of illegal aliens were at least as important a motive. Nevertheless, concern about the spillover of disorder from the drug-trafficking warfare in Mexico was clearly on the minds of both political leaders.

It would be a tragedy if the corruption and violence that have plagued Colombia for so long also engulf Mexico. Such a development would automatically be of grave concern to the United States. Colombia is reasonably far away; Mexico is our next door neighbor and a significant economic partner in the North America Free Trade Agreement. Chaos in that country would inevitably impact Americans—especially those living in the southwestern states. In some respects, it already has.³⁸

Drug Prohibition and the Mexico Problem

It should not come as a surprise that Mexico is on the path to becoming the next Colombia. The global trade in illegal drugs is a vast enterprise, conservatively estimated at \$300 billion a year, with the United States as the principal retail market, and Mexico is a key player; drug trafficking in Mexico alone is a multi-billion-dollar industry.³⁹ Indeed, the relative importance of the drug trade to Mexico's economy may be approaching the level of importance that the illicit trade has to the economy of Colombia. One can only hope that Mexico's drug commerce does not grow to the point that it has in Afghanistan. In that country, the drug trade is equal to two-thirds of all legal economic output.⁴⁰ Mexico is not yet at that dire point, but the trade is lucrative enough that rival gangs are willing to do whatever is necessary to gain or retain control of it.

U.S. policy seems to assume that if the Mexican government can eliminate the top drug lords, their organizations will fall apart, thereby greatly reducing the flow of illegal

drugs to the United States. Thus, U.S. officials have rejoiced at the willingness of President Fox's administration to make the drug war—and especially the capture of major drug-trafficking figures—a high priority.⁴¹ Since Fox took office in 2000, Mexico has arrested more than 36,000 drug traffickers, including top figures from nearly all the cartels.⁴² That neutralizing drug kingpins will achieve a lasting reduction in drug trafficking is the same belief that U.S. officials embraced with respect to the crackdown on the Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia during the 1990s. Subsequent developments proved the assumption to be erroneous. The elimination of those two cartels merely decentralized the Colombian drug trade. Instead of two large organizations controlling the trade, today some 300 much smaller, loosely organized groups do so.

More to the point, the arrests and killings of numerous top drug lords in both Colombia and Mexico over the years have not had a meaningful impact on the quantity of drugs entering the United States. Cutting off one head of the drug-smuggling Hydra merely results in more heads taking its place. Jorge Chabat, a Mexican security and drug policy analyst, notes: "For years, the U.S. told Mexico's government, 'The problem is that the narcos are still powerful because you don't dismantle the gangs.' Now they're doing just that . . . and the narcos are more powerful than ever."⁴³

Mexico can still avoid going down the same tragic path as Colombia, but time is growing short. Washington had better pay far more attention to the problem than it has to this point, and U.S. officials need to come up with better answers than the ineffectual and discredited policies of the past. If Washington continues to pursue a prohibitionist strategy, the violence and corruption that have convulsed Colombia will become dominant and permanent features of Mexico's life as well. The illicit drug trade has already penetrated the country's economy and society to an unhealthy degree.

The brutal reality is that prohibition simply drives commerce in a product under-

ground, creating an enormous potential black-market profit that attracts violence-prone criminal elements. When the United States and other countries consider whether to persist in a strategy of drug prohibition, they need to consider all of the potential societal costs. Drug abuse is certainly a major public health problem, and its societal costs are considerable. But, as we have seen over the decades in Colombia and other drug-source countries, banning the drug trade creates economic distortions and an opportunity for some of the most unsavory elements of society to gain firm footholds. Drug prohibition leads inevitably to an orgy of corruption and violence. Those have very real societal costs as well, and that reality is now becoming all too evident in our neighbor to the south.

U.S. officials need to ask whether they want to risk “another Colombia”—only this time directly on America’s southern border. If they don’t want to deal with the turmoil such a development would create, the Bush administration needs to abandon its prohibitionist strategy and do so quickly.

Notes

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