Trafficking and Transnational Crime
# Table of Contents

Volume 4, Number 2

**Drug cartels undermine the region’s democracies, weaken the media and corrupt our youth. How can we beat them?**

*Our Special Section on transnational crime in Latin America starts on page 38.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>The Right to Justice</td>
<td>Daniel Wilkinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Narcotics International, Inc.</td>
<td>Vanda Felbab-Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Crime’s Breeding Ground</td>
<td>Alma Guillermoprieto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Dirty Money</td>
<td>Kevin Casas-Zamora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>The War on Media</td>
<td>Carlos Lauria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Mexico-U.S. Relations: What’s Next?</td>
<td>Shannon O’Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Ask the Experts: How can communities protect themselves from drug violence?</td>
<td>Sérgio Cabral, Genaro García Luna and General Douglas Fraser respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>Charticle: Crime’s Family Tree</td>
<td>Sam Logan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>Understanding and Improving Mérida</td>
<td>Diana Villiers Negroponte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>The Trade in Human Lives</td>
<td>Alice Hill and Ramona Carey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Timeline: A Long, Strange Trip</td>
<td>Simon Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Your Economy on Drugs</td>
<td>William J. Bratton and William Andrews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Eight Steps to Reduce Crime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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A Colombian police officer inspects packages of seized cocaine at a police station in Medellin.
Table of Contents Spring 2010

Volume 4, Number 2

AQ UPFRONT

24 No Ordinary Trade Agreement GREGORY MEEKS
CAFTA-DR has already produced groundbreaking results.

28 Did Success Spoil the Concertación? PETER M. SIAVELIS
The challenges ahead for Chile's two dominant political coalitions.

33 Let's Get Engaged JAIME ALEMÁN
Panama's Ambassador to the U.S. on why the region needs to address security challenges collectively.

3 From the Editor

9 Panorama
U.S.-Cuba cultural exchanges, Chilean folk music, Brazilian iPhone apps, travel tips in Mendoza, Argentina, and more.

18 Innovators/Innovations
David Assael virtually transforms Santiago. Faride Raful leads Dominicans' youth participation. Gustavo Caetano creates Brazil's largest online video platform. Aurelio Martínez sings and campaigns to promote his community.

14 Hard Talk
Can Brazil play a significant role in containing Iran's nuclear ambitions? Marcel Biato and Alex Vatanka respond.

114 Fresh Look Reviews

118 Just the Numbers
Our elected leaders' salaries: Who's earning the most?

PLUS Survey Results:
Haitians and Dominicans share opinions on the economy and trade.

Michael J. McGuinness and Manuel A. Orillac look at Middle East investment in Latin America. Anne Hawkins on North Atlantic overfishing.

ONLINE
Check out our daily blog posts and Web Exclusive articles on late-breaking developments across the hemisphere at www.AmericasQuarterly.org. Readers are participating too. One recent comment in response to a post on Mexico's drug-related violence: "Even if you doubled Mexico's narcotics user rate, you'd still be under 1 percent of the total population." Join the AQ Online community.

Health Care Access and Quality: Passage of health care reform in the U.S. is not the end of the story. Now, the U.S. must confront the challenges of implementing expanded health care access. The Summer AQ will examine regional models of health care reform and the role of the private sector and government institutions in making quality, affordable health care available.

in our next issue:
With the U.S. accepting its share of responsibility for the violence and lawlessness south of its border and a greater emphasis on the social roots of the drug trade, Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s four-year battle with narco-traffickers has entered a new phase.

BY SHANNON O’NEIL
Open any Mexican newspaper today and the drug carnage is front and center. In the last three years, narco-related murders surpassed 18,000, nearly 8,000 of these occurred in 2009 alone. The macabre nature of the violence ratcheted up too, featuring heads rolling across an Acapulco disco floor, a “stewmaker” admitting to dissolving some 300 bodies in acid and a dead man’s face stitched onto a soccer ball. The drug cartels openly taunt the authorities and each other, hanging narcocantas, or banners, over major throughfares boasting about their latest kills and threatening future violence if not left alone. Both the number of the attacks and their brazenness—particularly in states such as Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Michoacán—are unprecedented.

Yet crime-related violence in Mexico is not new. Mexico has always been a supplier of illegal markets in the United States, from alcohol in the prohibition era, heroin during World War II, marijuana throughout the 1960s, and in recent decades, a variety of drugs including cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamines. As illicit businesses without access to formal contracts and courts, disputes and “mergers and acquisitions” have traditionally been settled with blood on the streets.

What has changed in recent decades is the scale of Mexico’s narcotics operations. U.S. demand has grown and diversified, and Mexico has increasingly become the primary supplier. While in 1990, 50
percent of U.S.-bound cocaine came through Mexico, today the figure is 90 percent.

It’s also important to note that the power base of the hemisphere’s drug trade has shifted from Colombia to Mexico. After four decades and billions of dollars, the U.S. “war on drugs” has pushed the epicenter of these illegal criminal networks closer to the U.S. border. The sheer amount of money that has accompanied this fundamental shift to transportation and smuggling just south of the U.S. border has upped the stakes. More resources have transformed the cartels into increasingly sophisticated organizations—with more professional enforcement arms.

Mexico’s democratization throughout the 1990s, which upset the long-standing collusion between some members of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and particular favored drug traffickers, has been another contributing factor. The PRI’s eroding political monopoly brought in new actors, undermined old deals, and opened up the illicit sector to those previously kept out in the cold. The combination of more lucrative opportunities, heightened competition and changes to the political game created dramatic uncertainty in the market, escalating the bloodshed. Legacies of the PRI’s 70-year rule—in particular the political manipulation of law enforcement and judicial branches, which limited professionalization and enabled widespread corruption—further aggravated the situation, leaving the new government with only weak tools to counter increasingly aggressive crime networks.

**Mexico Calls Out the Military**

Since Miguel de la Madrid in the early 1980s, Mexican presidents have repeatedly mobilized troops to combat the nation’s drug traffickers. Starting with President Ernesto Zedillo in the 1990s, each president also put police and judicial reforms on Mexico’s agenda. Often these changes merely renamed or reshuffled tarnished law enforcement agencies, such as when President Vincenc Fox (2000–2006) disbanded the judicial police force to form a new force. But even when reforms ran deeper, none were given time to solidify. In the rush to place his own personal stamp on security, each new president pushed aside his predecessor’s work, starting over with new reforms, even as the metaphorical paint of the last reform was still drying.

Calderón’s recent efforts differ primarily in scope. Just days after his new administration began work in December 2006, Calderón declared a war on narco-trafficking—making the establishment of law and order the signature policy for his administration. Over the past three-and-a-half years, he has sent some 45,000 soldiers onto Mexico’s streets, spent billions of dollars annually to upgrade their equipment and training and launched a broad process of police and judicial reform. He also increased the operations of both the police and the military, leading to record numbers of interdictions, arrests and extraditions to the United States.

**The United States Wakes Up**

Another fundamental break from the past is the U.S. response to Mexico’s challenges. Historically, the U.S. “war on drugs”—and U.S. security assistance in general—bypassed Mexico. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the U.S. spent millions of dollars in the Caribbean to cut off the drug trade route through Miami. During the 1990s, through the Andean Regional Initiative’s eradication and interdiction efforts, the U.S. poured billions into South America.

Both efforts and outlays largely ignored Mexico’s growing role as a transit country. Plan Colombia further widened the disparities in attention and resources. As recently as 2006, the U.S. was sending $600 million a year to Colombia, even as Mexico received a paltry $40 million in security-related aid. The limited funding reflected deep-seated historical tensions between the two neighbors, as well as distrust rooted in incidents such as the 1985 killing of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena and the 1998 Casablanca money laundering sting (in which U.S. officials kept Mexican authorities in the dark while operating on their soil, likely violating the country’s sovereignty). The lingering suspicions meant that genuine cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico was limited to trusted individuals at local levels, rather than creat-
ing regular, formal channels of communication or being implemented institutionally.

A shift in this status quo began under the George W. Bush administration, prodded by increasing U.S. recognition of the growing violence at the border as well as by support for Calderón’s aggressive stance. A March 2007 meeting between Presidents Bush and Calderón marked a turning point in the U.S.-Mexico bilateral security agenda. From this emerged the Mérida Initiative, which, once passed in June 2008 by the U.S. Congress, launched a $1.4 billion multi-year security package primarily destined for Mexico. With an ambitious mandate to break the power of organized crime, strengthen the U.S. southern border, improve Mexican institutional capacity, and reduce the demand for drugs, Mérida encompassed technology and military equipment, as well as law enforcement training and support for judicial reforms.

As important as the financial assistance, the U.S. and Mexican governments began an admittedly slow process of trust-building through official exchanges, training courses and, more recently, information sharing. This was a tacit recognition that taking on multinational criminal organizations requires cross-border cooperation. These efforts now bring together both the binational and inter-agency security processes within and across the two governments through an established office in Mexico City. By all accounts, intelligence sharing has increased substantially from the past (though it remains far from ideal). While unable to push forward many other important bilateral issues—immigration, trade, energy—U.S.-Mexico security cooperation dramatically increased in the last two years of the Bush administration.

Mexico has remained near the top of President Barack Obama’s foreign policy agenda—probably to the surprise of his more traditional foreign-policy, heavyweight advisors. Just eight days before his inauguration, the then-president-elect reaffirmed his strong financial commitment to support Mexico’s efforts, meeting with President Calderón in Washington. Over the next three months, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, and Attorney General Eric Holder all made their way south of the border to meet with Mexican officials to discuss mutual security concerns.

During her first visit, Clinton made her now-famous remark, “the United States recognizes that drug trafficking is not only Mexico’s problem. It is also an American problem. And we, in the United States, have a responsibility to help you address it.”

Talking about “co-responsibility,” she went on to explicitly recognize the U.S. role—through the money and guns that flow back south and fuel the drug cartels—in the violence besetting Mexico. This tone opened space for a continued partnership with Mexico under the new administration and, in the process, made possible a revision of the strategic framework underpinning bilateral security cooperation. Community-based programs and local-level initiatives have now joined the traditional focus on disrupting organized crime networks and strengthening Mexico’s police and court systems.

Clinton’s visit was quickly followed by President Obama’s own April trip to Mexico City, where he commended Calderón’s courageous stand and reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to “work diligently” to clean up its own house.

Back on the domestic front, concern about Mexico’s democratic, law-and-order president: Shortly after taking office in 2006, President Felipe Calderón launched a campaign against narco-trafficking.
grew on Capitol Hill, spurring at least 10 different meetings in the past year alone. The Democrat-controlled Congress strongly supported the administration’s efforts—fast-tracking some $720 million of Mérida money in 2009 to get the promised equipment in the hands of Mexico’s law enforcement forces faster. Congress also beefed up funds for the southwest border to help intercept arms and the bulk cash flowing into Mexico and completed the Bush administration’s promised buildup of Customs and Border Protection Patrol to 20,000 agents (from just 12,000 in 2006).

How far each agency and government can and will trust one another and work together will undoubtedly be a harbinger of future successes or failures.

The contacts and intelligence sharing between agencies and the two nations led to some stunning arrests in 2009. Last October, the two governments worked together to detain more than 300 members of La Familia Michoacana cartel, along with millions in cash and drugs, in a broad sweep throughout the United States. Shared intelligence has also been credited in the takedowns of Mexican drug kingpins Arturo Beltrán Leyva and Teodoro García Simental in December 2009 and January 2010, respectively. Nevertheless, both interagency and bi-national cooperation remain a constant challenge. How far each agency and government can and will trust one another and work together will undoubtedly be a harbinger of future successes or failures.

After Mérida

As the Obama administration looks to its second year, the Mérida Initiative’s designated three-year term is about to end. While U.S. support will likely continue, changes in focus are inevitable. There has already been a shift from a heavy concentration on military equipment to capacity and institution building. This is in part due to the long-awaited delivery of the promised Bell and Blackhawk helicopters and other high-tech equipment, allowing the U.S. to move on to other priorities. But it is also a recognition of the complicated realities of Mexico’s drug war and the limitations of military hardware.

Mexico’s main problem is not control of its territory, which was the principal challenge that Colombia faced. Mexico’s dilemma is corruption. Without clean cops, clean courts and clean politicians, Mexico’s war will never be won. Instead, Mexico’s challenge is to remake its law enforcement, judicial and government institutions to work transparently, effectively and fairly.

Working with Mexico, the U.S. is starting to shift its focus from the national to the local level—and the even more difficult task of reforming the vast municipal and state police forces. At all levels, both countries must maintain full respect and protections for human rights. If the ultimate goal is to secure a strong, vibrant, secure democracy, fundamental rights and institutions cannot be weakened in the pursuit of public safety.

While these changes are important, a fundamental problem remains. Policymakers have declared a war that in the end can’t be “won.” Instead, both countries should work together toward the goal of getting to a manageable drug and crime problem, allowing basic public security and safety in the streets. This will require an approach that recognizes and combats the economic and social factors behind the violence. In one way, this new focus is more ambitious than the sole emphasis on law enforcement, demanding a long-term, engaged effort at improving people’s lives and economic prospects. But in another, it is also more feasible. Building and strengthening institutions is a difficult and uncertain process, particularly in Mexico where decades of corruption have undermined past efforts. Reaching these goals will require long-term commitment and policy consistency across administrations on both sides of the border.

There are reasons for optimism. With U.S. assistance, Calderón’s government has made great strides in professionalizing the federal police force. In addition, the 2008 judicial reform, when finally implemented, will fundamentally transform the country’s court systems. But the crucial test will be when the next Mexican president takes office in 2012. Will he or she build on the law enforcement investments of the past six years, or will the new administration start over, as so many have in the past? Solidifying the good in today’s changes, and building on them far into the future, should be the basis for the next phase of U.S.-Mexico security cooperation.

72 Americas Quarterly SPRING 2010