

BAD NEIGHBOR POLICY

Washington's Futile War
on Drugs in Latin America

Ted Galen Carpenter

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CHAPTER SEVEN

MEXICO: THE NEXT COLOMBIA?

U.S. leaders are deeply alarmed at the situation in Colombia, fearing that the democratic political structure in that country could collapse. Their nightmare scenario is the emergence of a Marxist/narcotrafficking state characterized by extensive government involvement in all levels of drug trafficking and a corresponding political impetus to maintain an environment of corruption that provides financial profits for various groups in the state hierarchy.

Those fears are not unfounded, but U.S. policymakers have a serious problem brewing much closer to home. The prominence of the drug trade in Mexico has mushroomed in recent years. Some press reports contended that, by 1997, Mexican drug organizations were rivaling or even surpassing the strength of the Colombian cartels.¹ Two years later Thomas Constantine, head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, stated that the power of Mexican drug traffickers had grown "virtually geometrically" over the previous five years and that corruption was "unparalleled."² As just one indicator of Mexico's growing importance in drug trafficking, 7 of the 12 names listed on the U.S. government's May 2001 list of "international drug kingpins" were those of Mexicans.³ (Under U.S. law, individuals and enterprises are prohibited from doing business with any individual listed as an international drug kingpin.)

And—as is always the case with lucrative black markets—the trade has been accompanied by escalating corruption and violence.

In a number of troubling ways, Mexico is beginning to resemble Colombia a decade or so ago.⁴ Indeed, Mexicans are beginning to refer to the trend as the "Colombianization" of their country.⁵

The rise of Mexico's importance in the drug trade is the result of several factors that have facilitated increased ties among criminal networks and increased incentives for violence and corruption. Mexico had long played a significant role in marijuana production and trafficking. Indeed, during the 1970s the country was the leading source of marijuana consumed in the United States. Under U.S. pressure, the Mexican government waged a major offensive against marijuana production during that decade, including a spraying campaign using the herbicide Paraquat, a toxic chemical that acts as a leaf defoliant.⁶ Not only did the eradication effort produce a drop in the supply of Mexican marijuana, it produced a sharp decline in demand, as American marijuana users feared the health effects of Paraquat contamination. Many marijuana traffickers switched their lines of supply from Mexico to Colombia, where they could acquire an unspoiled product. The outcome, though, was not an overall decline in either the drug supply or drug consumption. Instead, there was a classic example of the push-down, pop-up effect. Colombia promptly replaced Mexico as the leading exporter to the United States. Mexico regained its position in the 1980s following a crackdown on marijuana production in Colombia.⁷

The 1970s was also a crucial decade for Mexico's involvement in the heroin trade. Before that time, the overwhelming majority of heroin used in the United States came either from Turkey or the "Golden Triangle" of Southeast Asia. As one of its first actions in the war on drugs, however, the Nixon administration both bribed and pressured the government of Turkey to eliminate opium poppy cultivation. That campaign achieved a surprising degree of success. However, Mexico promptly replaced Turkey as America's leading heroin supplier. The eradication campaign against opium poppies in Mexico proved less successful. Poppy farmers began to shift their production to more remote locations and to use smaller, less

easily detected plots of land.⁸ Moreover, as RAND Corporation analyst Kevin Jack Riley points out: "Where once the Mexican drug industry was geographically contained, production now extends throughout the country."⁹

Mexico's extensive involvement in the cocaine trade is more recent than its role in either the marijuana or the heroin trade. It dates from the mid-1980s, when U.S. efforts made it more difficult for Colombian traffickers to transport their product via routes in the Caribbean. The initial involvement of Mexican drug kingpins was ominous in that it expanded cocaine markets and the economic and political interests of individuals participating in those markets over a much broader spectrum. That development became important later, especially between 1989 and 1992, when U.S.-led efforts to go after the financial resources of the Colombian cartels created a new opportunity for Mexican traffickers, who began to take payment in cocaine rather than cash. One result of that arrangement was that it gave Mexican traffickers a substantial stake in lucrative U.S. wholesale and retail markets. They soon moved to solidify that stake by creating or expanding syndicates of their own.¹⁰

Even President Bill Clinton acknowledged the existence of a push-down, pop-up effect with regard to Mexico. "We had a lot of success a few years ago in taking down a number of the Colombian drug cartels," he stated in late 1999, "but one of the adverse consequences of that was a lot of the operations were moved north to Mexico."¹¹ In February 2000 U.S. ambassador to Mexico Jeffrey Davidow created a furor when he contended that the country had become the world's "main headquarters for drug traffickers."¹²

Mexico's increasing prominence in the drug trade infuriates hard-line drug warriors in the United States. An April 1998 editorial in the *Washington Times* noted acidly, "There's a lot of 'cooperation' on drugs going on in Mexico these days, but it's not with the United States."¹³ Roger Noriega, an aide to Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) later charged that the executive branch's annual

certification of Mexico as cooperating in the war on drugs had "become a farce." Helms followed up that assessment with a stinging letter to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in February 2000 in which he charged that "the Clinton administration, for many years, has failed to apply the law faithfully when it comes to its annual March 1 certification of Mexico's anti-drug cooperation."¹⁴ Helms and other congressional conservatives have long demanded that Mexico be decertified as Colombia was in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ Indeed, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted 251 to 175 in March 1997 to overturn President Clinton's certification of Mexico unless the Mexican government was able to show within 90 days that it was making significant progress in the war on drugs.¹⁶ Although the Senate declined to go along with the House action, the vote was a clear expression of anger among congressional conservatives.

Conservative Republicans have been the most critical of Mexico's role, but annoyance with drug-related corruption in Mexico is not confined to that portion of the U.S. political spectrum. Even some congressional Democrats, including Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), and Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), have adopted highly critical positions on occasion—even going so far as to advocate decertification.¹⁷

Given Mexico's economic and political importance to the United States, it is highly unlikely that any administration would take that step, however. (Moreover, the economic sanctions that would have to be imposed following a decertification decision would seem to violate the provisions of NAFTA.)

THE ORGANIZATION OF MEXICO'S DRUG TRADE

As in Colombia during the 1980s and early 1990s, the drug trade in Mexico is dominated by a small number of tightly organized cartels. (The more decentralized structure that characterizes drug

trafficking in Colombia today has yet to make an appearance.) Six regionally based cartels currently dominate the Mexican drug trade and have divided up the country into commercial territories. Although there is some overlap in those territories, such an arrangement minimizes competition and the resulting struggles among the various organizations.

- The Gulf cartel is so named because it operates all along the gulf coast of Mexico, from Tampico in the north, through the Yucatán Peninsula and southward to the border with Belize. It is run by Humberto García Abrego, the brother of the notorious drug kingpin Juan García Abrego, who is now in prison for drug offenses.
- The Juárez cartel operates mainly along the Caribbean coast, central Mexico, and along the Texas–Mexico border. Juárez, a city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, has Mexico's largest concentration of *maquiladoras*. That situation is perfect for drug trafficking, especially given the constant flow of truck traffic taking *maquiladora* products across the border to the United States. Led by Vicente Fuentes, the Juárez cartel deals in heroin and marijuana but gets most of its revenue from the transshipment of Colombian cocaine.¹⁸
- The Colima cartel operates in the western state of Colima and (in an isolated enclave) along the far eastern Texas–Mexico border.
- The El Mayo/El Chapo cartel is a relatively new gang formed by the merger of two smaller drug-trafficking organizations—one run by Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada and the other by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. It operates along the Pacific Coast and along the Arizona–Mexico border. That organization is also well placed to fill the void created by the recent weakening of the Arellano Félix cartel (see below).

- The Valdez cartel is an organization of drug smugglers in Mexico's restive southern state of Chiapas. Although there is no hard evidence of collusion between the drug gang and leftist rebels in Chiapas, reports of such collusion continue to surface.
- The Arellano Félix (or Tijuana) cartel was run until early 2002 by brothers Benjamin and Ramon Arellano Félix and operated primarily in the state of Baja California, especially the Tijuana area. It was the most violent of the Mexican drug organizations. It recruited gang members from Tijuana and nearby San Diego.¹⁹ With the death of Ramon (killed in a shootout with Mexican police forces in February 2002) and the capture of Benjamin in March 2002, the future of the Arellano Félix organization is uncertain. Already other drug traffickers, including Ismael Zambada, are vying to fill the void created by the brothers' removal.²⁰

Most Mexican gangs concentrate on the distribution of drugs produced elsewhere (primarily in Colombia) rather than on domestic production—although that is beginning to change. Given their focus, those organizations are seen as important allies by the Colombian drug traffickers. Many times the Mexicans act as middlemen in the drug trade, in charge of ensuring that the product makes it to the United States. In November 2000 Mexico's attorney general mentioned the existence of an alliance, thought to account for more than 20 percent of the cocaine smuggled annually into the United States from Mexico, between the Colombian FARC and the Arellano Félix cartel. Mexican officials speculated that the FARC sent cocaine to Mexico in return for the cartel sending weapons south. According to some intelligence analysis, the unusually large volumes of cocaine (8 tons in March and 13 tons in May) confiscated by the U.S. Coast Guard in two major seizures suggest that the alliance between the FARC and the Arellano Félix

cartel may have been "significantly larger and more complex than originally described by Mexican and U.S. officials."²¹

Recently the level of cooperation between Colombian and Mexican traffickers ratcheted a notch higher. In early April 2001 Colombian president Andrés Pastrana and Mexico's new president Vicente Fox met and signed bilateral accords to fight drug trafficking. The measures focused on increased intelligence sharing and heightened provisions for financial monitoring and controls to combat money laundering. But at the same time Pastrana and Fox were meeting, the leaders of all the Mexican drug organizations, except for the Arellano Félix gang, held a summit to coordinate and adjust their efforts. In other words, as the Mexican and Colombian governments were forming an enforcement cartel, the traffickers were forming an overall trafficking cartel. Even more alarming, a group of Colombians were reportedly in attendance at the traffickers' summit serving as "consultants" to the Mexicans.²²

The formation of such an overarching cartel is reminiscent of how the major drug organizations in Colombia colluded to battle that government's antidrug measures in the 1980s and early 1990s. Then in Colombia, now in Mexico, the traffickers always seem to be one step ahead of the authorities in terms of organization.

THE ESCALATION OF CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE

One of the most troubling similarities between Mexico in the early twenty-first century and Colombia a decade or so ago is the explosion of corruption. Admittedly, corruption is hardly new to Mexico. What is new is the scale of the corruption. Author Mike Gray notes, "In the old days, *morrida*—the bite—was accepted as an efficient lubricator, a means of getting things done while sharing the wealth in an otherwise unequal society. But with the arrival of the narco-billions everything shifted gears."²³ Drug-related corruption in Mexico began to explode.²⁴ Already in the mid-1980s

Mexico was becoming the major transshipment route for the Colombian drug cartels in response to a U.S.-orchestrated crackdown against the previous favorite routes—through the Bahamas and other islands in the Caribbean. Guillermo González Calderoni, former commander of the Mexican Federal Police, notes that “in 1984, we seized 300 kilos of cocaine, and that set a record in Mexico. Never before had such a large shipment been seized.” González Calderoni also acknowledges the link between the growth of the drug trade and the growth of corruption in Mexico. “I discovered that the Colombian traffickers were using Mexican dealers—marijuana traffickers—to move cocaine. From that moment on, the power of corruption definitely increased.”²⁵

The Drug Enforcement Administration and other U.S. agencies has long been concerned about evidence of corruption in Mexico’s law enforcement agencies, but one event served to reveal its magnitude. In February 1985 DEA agent Enrique Camarena was kidnapped off the streets of Guadalajara. Most troubling, he had been snatched by uniformed men. Jack Lawn, DEA administrator from 1985 to 1990, described the significance of that episode: “We determined that the individuals who took Camarena off the streets were law enforcement personnel. That was particularly galling to me and to law enforcement throughout the nation, because when the system becomes so corrupted that the law enforcement community in the host country upon which you depend are part of the problem, then nothing is safe.”²⁶ Lawn added that the corruption was not confined to low-level police functionaries: “Governors, ministers, corruption in the office of the attorney general of Mexico—very, very high up.”²⁷

The nexus between corruption and the drug trade, though, is revealed most clearly in the role played by ordinary police personnel. González Calderoni ably describes the process:

You have to do what everyone else does in order to survive, so it’s a common practice for police commanders to utilize their position to

get money. But they don’t take money only for themselves. Quite often they must pay their superiors to get appointed. They also pay to get a job in a certain geographic territory.

For a border region, people will pay a lot of money. The border is the funnel. Tons and tons of drugs will have to go through, and the traffickers will want to pay to make sure that they go through. So for a border appointment you get charged \$1 million. And then you would have to pay \$200,000 or \$300,000 per month to your bosses in Mexico City in order to remain in that position.

So what did the police officer need to do in these border areas after he bought the position? He would definitely have to work in drug trafficking in order to make back the money he paid to get there and also to cover the monthly expenses.²⁸

As bad as the corruption in Mexico was in the 1980s, the trend has clearly worsened in the past decade or so. Both major and relatively minor officials have been implicated in the drug trade. In August 2001 the former security chief from the northern city of Mexicali was arrested for allegedly providing protection to the Arellano Félix drug cartel.²⁹ It was neither an isolated nor a relatively new phenomenon. Twelve years earlier the National Police commander, Luis Esteban Villalón, was caught with \$2.4 million in cash 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, Juan García Abrego.³⁰ General José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, once Mexico’s counterpart to America’s White House drug czar, was jailed in 1997 for accepting bribes from Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the late head of the Juárez drug cartel.³¹

The Gutiérrez Rebollo episode was especially disheartening to U.S. drug warriors. When newly elected president Ernesto Zedillo took office at the end of 1994, it was apparent that the Federal Judicial Police were riddled with corruption. Indeed, that institution was so compromised that most police personnel never even

bothered to pick up their paychecks, since their salary was such a minor portion of their real income.³² The new reform police chief did not last long. Before he could implement plans to clean house, he was poisoned in his sleep. Although he lived through the assault, the incident left him paralyzed from the neck down.

Zedillo, in desperation, turned to the military, appointing Gutiérrez Rebello as Mexico's drug czar. It was a dubious move from the outset, for there was ample evidence that the Mexican military was as involved as the federal and local police forces in the drug trade. The general, though, seemed to have excellent drug-fighting credentials, having personally led a much-publicized raid against the leader of the Sinaloa cartel. U.S. officials greeted the appointment enthusiastically. U.S. drug czar General Barry McCaffrey fairly gushed with praise: "He has a reputation for impeccable integrity. . . . He's a deadly serious guy."³³ McCaffrey predicted a new era in U.S.-Mexican cooperation to battle the scourge of illegal drugs.

Three months later the Zedillo 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 cartels that competed with Carrillo Fuentes's organization. The news that Mexico's drug czar had been on the take hit Washington hard. The drug warriors were not discouraged for long, though; soon McCaffrey and President Clinton were praising the Mexican government's efforts to root out corruption.

Police and military leaders in Mexico are not the only ones to have been seduced by the corruption flowing from the drug trade. High-level elected officials and other well-connected politicians also have been implicated in drug-related scandals. In 1997 American intelligence sources concluded that two Mexican state governors, Manlio Fabio Beltrones Rivera and Jorge Carrillo Olea, along with Raúl Salinas de Gortari, brother of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, had collaborated with various drug kingpins.³⁴ Two years later the Mexican government issued a warrant for the

arrest of Mario Villanueva, former governor of Quintana Roo state (which includes Cancún), on 28 drug charges.³⁵ In April 2001 the government arrested Brigadier General Ricardo Martínez Pera and two other high-ranking officers for allegedly collaborating with one of Mexico's leading drug cartels.³⁶ A month later authorities apprehended Villanueva. (He had disappeared just days before leaving office in 1999 as U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies investigated his involvement in the drug trade.) Among other allegations, a U.S. indictment unsealed in May 2001 charged that he had accepted \$500,000 in payoffs for each of several cocaine shipments that came through his state between 1994 and early 1999. In all, the indictment charged, he had conspired to bring 200 tons of cocaine across the U.S.-Mexico border.³⁷

But it is not just the high-profile cases that illustrate how extensively drug-related corruption has penetrated Mexican society. The extent of the corruption became evident in 2001 when the new attorney general fired more than 1,400 of the country's 3,500 federal police officers for that offense and criminally prosecuted 357 of them.³⁸ Jorge Chabat, a drug policy expert at Mexico City's Center for Economic Development Research, stated bluntly, "You need a professional and honest police force. These are different things, and we have neither."³⁹ Alejandro González Alcocér, the governor of Baja California, reached a similar conclusion. "The drugs are coming in by land, sea and air," he stated in an interview. "The federal authorities have jurisdiction. But frankly we don't have much confidence in them. We worry that if we try to coordinate operations with them, our plans will be communicated to the traffickers."⁴⁰

One knowledgeable Mexican source estimates that at least 20 percent of agents supposedly fighting the drug trade are actually on the payroll of the drug gangs. That is depressing enough, but one former gang member puts the figure at 80 percent for state and federal police officers.⁴¹ Even if the lower figure is accurate, it suggests such a degree of penetration of law enforcement by drug-

trafficking organizations as to render supposed antidrug efforts in Mexico farcical.

In addition to fostering corruption throughout the Mexican government, the illicit drug trade has been associated with a rising tide of violence—some of it almost routine, some of it quite horrific. The assassination of the commander of investigative police and an assistant in the northern border state of Tamaulipas was so ordinary that it scarcely merited comment in the news media.⁴² Other incidents, though, were more remarkable.

American drug warriors have been shocked at the brazenness of both the corruption and the violence. One especially revealing incident took place in November 1991, when U.S. radar tracked a suspicious plane flying north out of Colombia and U.S. authorities alerted their Mexican counterparts as the plane approached Veracruz. Mexican Federal Police closed in on the plane as soon as it landed, but they quickly came under fire and most were killed. Retired DEA agent John Hensley noted the surprising element of that episode: "There were army vehicles in the perimeter area around where this attack took place. We found out later [that] army troops had been paid to protect that airstrip and that load coming into Mexico. Of all the shocks I've had in my career, that was probably the biggest, that an entire military unit would be involved in protecting drug lords, and to the point that they would actually attack and murder Mexican federal drug police."⁴³

The level of drug corruption and its related violence has only grown with the passage of time. In August 1997 gunmen walked into a restaurant near the border in Juárez and fired more than 100 rounds at a group gathered around a single large table. The incident left six people dead and three others wounded. Investigators speculated that the bloody incident was part of a war for control of the Juárez drug cartel.⁴⁴ In May 2001 Jesús Carrola (who had served briefly as head of the Mexico City judicial police in 1997) and his two brothers were found executed gangland style. Carrola had had a checkered past. The main reason for his abrupt

departure as head of the judicial police was a flurry of media reports linking him to the Tijuana cartel.⁴⁵

Struggle over drug-trade turf also has produced an epidemic of violence in other Mexican cities. "In Tijuana, these kinds of killings have become so frequent that it's almost a normal occurrence," admitted Teodoro González Luna, the spokesman for the Baja California state government.⁴⁶ That state's attorney general estimated that drug-related violence accounted for 40 percent of the homicides.⁴⁷ Another Tijuana official also emphasized the link between the illicit drug trade and the growing level of violence: "There are well-known public officials who are assassinated for doing their jobs. Other men are killed because they want easy money and turn to drug trafficking. This is definitely on the rise in Tijuana."⁴⁸

The level of violence in Tijuana had become so bad by the spring of 2000 that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration seriously considered pulling all of its agents out of the city. "Tijuana's drug-related killings appear to be escalating in the last year and a half and have reached into Mexican government circles," Florida International University professor William Walker stated. "In a way, U.S. agents are in over their heads. They don't know who among their contacts they can trust."⁴⁹

As Walker's comments suggest, in many cases the problems of corruption and violence appear to overlap. On February 27, 2000, Alfredo de la Torre Márquez became the second Tijuana police chief assassinated in less than six years. A week later seven men were arrested for his murder and confessed to working for Sinaloa-based drug kingpin Ismael "Mayo" Zambada. Two of the men were former members of de la Torre Márquez's own police force.⁵⁰ Those members of police forces who choose to get involved in the drug trade have highly marketable skills, including inside knowledge of police methods and crime-scene investigation techniques, weapons training, and insider connections to insulate themselves (and their kingpin employers) from prosecution.

One of the worst incidents of violence that implicated government agencies occurred in September 1998. A 38-year-old rancher, apparently the target of a drug-related killing, was tortured in his own living room before gunmen put him against a wall and shot him along with 18 relatives and neighbors. Investigators stated that men carrying assault rifles and dressed in the color of Federal Police uniforms carried out the shootings.⁵¹

Two years earlier the grotesquely tortured body of Rafael López Cruz was found dumped along the side of a road outside Tijuana. He had been killed by individuals who had first meticulously broken nearly every bone in his body. The episode might have been dismissed as just another drug-gang killing had López Cruz not been a state judicial police agent who had previously complained about narcotics-related corruption in the ranks of his agency.⁵²

The Márquez assassination and the Cruz murder were not isolated incidents. In another episode, a bloody gun battle ensued when Mexican Federal Police tried to stop the Arellanos' armed motorcade in downtown Tijuana. The commander of the police unit and three other officers were killed by the Arellanos' bodyguards. Those bodyguards, it turned out, were local police officers.⁵³

The drug-related violence in Tijuana has long intimidated the national government. After several special federal prosecutors sent to Tijuana from Mexico City were murdered, the attorney general said that he could not find anyone else willing to take the post.⁵⁴ Mexican leaders are not the only ones intimidated by the drug lords. Stan Pimental, an FBI agent stationed in Mexico during the early and mid-1990s, expressed sympathy for the plight of the special prosecutors: "I wouldn't go to Tijuana unless I had a battalion-size force that I knew were loyal to me to go after somebody like the Arellanos."⁵⁵

Attempts at reforming corrupt police forces have fizzled. In Juárez, for example, the one-time mayor, Gustavo Elizondo, fired

more than 300 corrupt policemen and substantially raised the salaries of the remaining officers in the hope of counterbalancing the financial inducements offered by the drug lords. Elizondo's plan was well motivated, but it failed to address another important reason why police personnel were willing to cooperate with drug-trafficking organizations: self-preservation. In a city such as Juárez, where the drug-trafficking organizations are clearly more powerful than the authorities, choosing to side with the rather hapless government poses a bigger threat to the safety of oneself and one's family.

Thus, the police in the city remain corrupt. As noted by Ignacio Alvarado, a journalist based in the city for many years, during the entire decade of the 1980s, the police "made only one seizure [of cocaine routed through the city], and that was by mistake." He adds: "The police are completely corrupted. They never investigate any murder by narco-traffickers. They only talk to the family of the victims, and they do that only so they can say that they did it. The police know exactly who the traffickers are, but they're either bought or threatened, so nothing happens."⁵⁶

U.S. support for reform of Mexico's police forces has not changed the equation. In 1998 polygraph evidence indicated that most top investigators of an elite U.S.-trained police unit had ties to drug traffickers. Many of those investigators had been chosen for their posts after rigorous screening methods set up by American operatives. A high-level U.S. law enforcement official stated bluntly: "It's a disaster."⁵⁷ But it was a disaster that has become the norm in Mexico.

Washington has found that it cannot even be certain of Mexican officials who seem to be blowing the whistle on corrupt colleagues. In July 1996 Ricardo Cordero Ontiveros, who had resigned his post in the attorney general's office the previous November, charged at a news conference that Mexico's antidrug effort was "a joke." Brandishing official memos and tape recordings to prove his allegations, Cordero alleged that the attorney general

had angrily cut him off when he tried to present evidence of official wrongdoing.⁵⁸ Ten days later Cordero himself was arrested on charges of bribery and narcotics trafficking.⁵⁹ Was the arrest merely retaliation for his public revelations of corruption in the attorney general's office? Or was Cordero as corrupt as many others in Mexico's law enforcement agencies? American officials have no way of knowing.

Even the most prominent Mexicans are not immune from the violence spawned by the drug-trafficking organizations. The assassinations of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, head of the long-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI's presidential candidate in the 1994 election, and Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo, are all widely believed to have been drug related.⁶⁰ Colosio's assassination was eerily reminiscent of the earlier assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in Colombia. Mike Gray expresses a cynical but perhaps appropriate conclusion: "If there was any doubt that Mexico was swirling down the same drainpipe as Colombia, the killing of Colosio—a reformer in the mold of Carlos Galán—should have put it to rest."⁶¹ Associated Press correspondent Mark Stevenson reaches an equally pessimistic conclusion: "The violence of Mexico's drug trade is beginning to seep into all levels of society. No longer confined to high-rolling drug lords in rough border towns and addicts on the streets, it is striking at lawyers, judges, police, soldiers and even doctors."⁶²

A prominent Mexico City newspaper editor, speaking off the record, claimed that the killing of Ruiz Massieu, who was a close friend of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and former agricultural minister Carlos Hank González, was part of a continuing feud between Mexico's largest drug cartels and their associates in the Salinas government. The editor charged further that "Carlos Hank is the biggest money launderer in Mexico. . . . This killing was a reprisal for the murder of Colosio, a tragic event that many people believe was engineered by Hank and other officials around

Salinas."⁶³ Whatever the truth of such allegations, the murky circumstances surrounding the assassinations of Colosio and Ruiz Massieu (as well as the murders of other prominent Mexicans) raise serious questions about the extent of high-level Mexican officials' involvement in the drug trade. It also raises questions about the extent to which a succession of Mexican governments have waged the war on drugs as opposed to merely maintaining the appearance of waging that battle in order to appease Washington.

The root problem in Mexico, as in Colombia and other drug-producing or drug-transportation states, is that the narcotics trade has become an important part of the economy, and powerful constituencies have grown up around that trade. Shortly before he became foreign minister in the government of Vicente Fox, Jorge Castañeda bluntly admitted that reality: "It's a business. It has to be seen as a business. And there are regions of the country where the drug economy really is central to the local economy."⁶⁴ Former FBI agent Stan Pimental describes the pervasive economic role played by the drug-trafficking organizations: "Cartel leaders have built roads. They've built houses. They've built hospitals. They've built clinics, chapels, you name it, supporting teachers for the families that work for them. So it's a lot of money being expended by these cartels there. And if we, the U.S. government, could stop that, or the Mexican government could stop that, it would put a big crimp for a number of years in the economy of Mexico."⁶⁵ That is precisely why the prohibitionist strategy is an exercise in futility, not just in Mexico but in any country where the drug trade plays a significant economic role.

WILL VICENTE FOX'S ADMINISTRATION BE DIFFERENT?

U.S. officials remain optimistic that the administration of President Vicente Fox will be much more dedicated and effective than preceding governments in waging the war on drugs. Joe Keefe,

special operations chief of the DEA, pronounced himself "cautiously optimistic." The new government, he said, was "showing us things early on. . . . I really think, honestly, that the Fox administration is dealing with the corruption that has been endemic for many moons."⁶⁶ Edward Jurith, acting director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, seemed even more optimistic in November 2001, stating "President Fox has made a real commitment that I think is different from the past. Granted, there are some rough challenges ahead, corruption obviously, and the resistance of many Mexican institutions to move forward. But I think with leadership from the top and reform of the Mexican political system there's hope that I've not seen in years past."⁶⁷

Washington has acted on its optimism about Fox's leadership in the Mexican component of the war on drugs by tripling the funding of force law enforcement assistance to the Mexican police.⁶⁸ For the first time in years, U.S. authorities seem willing to share intelligence on drug traffickers with their Mexican federal counterparts, especially the newly formed Federal Agency of Investigation, patterned after America's own FBI. (The greater U.S. confidence about sharing information has not yet made it down to the state and local levels of Mexican law enforcement.)

Thus far, the Fox administration does seem to be making a more serious effort than its predecessors to go after major drug traffickers. The most notable success to date was the dramatic weakening of the Arellano Félix organization. The death of Ramon Arellano Félix (the cartel's especially brutal enforcer) and the subsequent capture of his brother Benjamin (the head of the organization) astonished Mexicans and Americans alike. Previously, the Arellano Félix gang seemed invincible. (Even that achievement may be tainted, however. Evidence has emerged that the police who shot Ramon may have been working for a rival trafficker.)⁶⁹

Besides striking a blow against Mexico's most violent drug-trafficking cartel, the Fox administration has made the extradition

of accused drug traffickers a cornerstone of its new crime-fighting effort with the United States, and there were a number of high-profile extraditions during Fox's first year in office. That trend experienced a setback in October 2001, however, when the Mexican supreme court ruled that the government cannot extradite to the United States any suspect who might receive a sentence that exceeds Mexico's maximum punishment of 60 years in prison. U.S. officials expressed disappointment with the ruling, since the maximum penalty for convicted drug kingpins in the United States often exceeds 60 years. It remains to be seen whether the court's decision creates the conditions for a nasty fight on the extradition issue similar to those that have flared periodically between the United States and Colombia over the past three decades.

The upsurge in extraditions under the Fox administration also creates concerns about a potential increase in the level of violence. Some Mexicans worry that the policy could incite the wrath of the drug cartels. They point explicitly to Colombia, where the extradition of drug lords to the United States became a major factor triggering an epidemic of murders and terrorist bombings in the late 1980s. "We are about to enter into a serious crisis like Colombia if the government insists with [sic] this," warned a lawyer representing several cartel members. "The traffickers could create serious problems for the government. It will be like a bomb that explodes when you least expect it."⁷⁰

Moreover, even if the campaign against the drug traffickers persists and other major cartels are weakened as the Arellano Félix organization has been, it may simply lead to a decentralization of the drug trade—much as the Colombian government's war against the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s led to such decentralization. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, Mexico's national security adviser, contends that the increasing government pressure has forced the cartels to split up different parts of their business. He also admits, though, that this fragmentation has led to the emergence of smaller drug gangs and independent operators. Moreover, he fears that

there could be an increase in turf battles as a larger number of competitors battle over market share.⁷¹ Indeed, that appears to have been a major initial effect of the weakening of the Arellano Félix cartel. Less than two weeks after authorities captured Benjamin Arellano Félix, three people were killed and two others wounded in what observers speculated was the opening round of a struggle for control of the Tijuana drug trade.⁷² As those who have witnessed such turf battles in American cities can testify, a great many innocent victims can get caught in the crossfire.

Beyond those concerns, it is still not clear whether the Fox administration will stay the course in supporting Washington's war on drugs, especially if the adverse domestic consequences begin to mount. At the November 2001 Binational Conference on Reducing Drug Demand, Mexico's interior minister, Santiago Creel Miranda, conceded that, while the 2002 budget would emphasize public security and the war on drugs, the extent of his government's commitment would be constrained by "the limited resources we have," including an expected decline in tax revenues.⁷³ Creel Miranda also pointed to the assassination of two federal judges in Mazatlán during the week before the conference as another example of the difficulties his government faced.

Of greater concern to some U.S. policymakers are the views of President Fox and his foreign minister, Jorge Castañeda. On several occasions Fox has flirted rhetorically with the option of drug legalization. In one interview he indicated agreement with a police officer who had suggested that the only way to win the war on drugs, thus eliminating the profits and violence caused by drug trafficking, was legalization. Perhaps cognizant of the fate that befell Colombian president Ernesto Samper for similar rhetorical infractions, Fox quickly amended that statement to emphasize that he did not expect such a step to be taken anytime soon.⁷⁴ Castañeda has been even more negative toward the drug war. On one occasion he stated bluntly that the time had come for rethinking "this absurd war no one really wants to wage."⁷⁵

A veteran observer of the Mexican drug scene, *Washington Times* correspondent Johanna Tuckman takes a more skeptical view than do U.S. officials of the Fox administration's commitment to the war on drugs. "After nearly six months in office, the Fox administration can boast of several high-profile arrests and a steady string of sizable drug seizures, but nothing spectacularly different from previous occasions when new Mexican governments sought to put their drug-fighting credentials on display."⁷⁶

The historical record supports that skepticism. Even President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, whose brother was later implicated in the drug trade, took vigorous (and highly visible) actions during his initial year in office. Among other things, he stepped up crop eradication efforts, created a new post in the attorney general's office to coordinate antidrug activities, and pushed to amend the criminal legal code to increase the penalties for crimes linked to drug trafficking, especially actions involving public officials.⁷⁷ The campaign against drugs came to involve one-third of the nation's defense budget and 60 percent of the attorney general's budget.⁷⁸ None of those flamboyant gestures amounted to anything in the long run. Salinas's successor, Ernesto Zedillo, also charged that the drug trade posed a mortal threat to Mexico and pledged a vigorous campaign to eliminate that scourge.⁷⁹ But the trade, and the accompanying corruption, grew steadily worse during his presidency.

Given the ambivalence that both Fox and Castañeda have expressed about the prohibitionist strategy, there is legitimate reason to wonder whether the new government is not simply going through the motions to placate the United States. That would not be surprising. After all, previous Mexican governments experienced the consequences of seeming to be insufficiently cooperative in waging Washington's war on drugs. The Fox administration certainly has no desire to repeat their experience.

A few months before he became foreign minister, Castañeda himself related how the game is played. "It is said that each administration in Mexico . . . will pick and choose which cartel to

go after, to sort of offer them up as a sacrificial lamb to the Americans and, in a way, at least tolerate the other cartels that they don't go after."⁸⁰

WILL MEXICO GO THE WAY OF COLOMBIA?

In some ways Mexico has the potential to become even more corrupt than Colombia. Money laundering is an important part of the drug-trafficking network. In fact, then-secretary of the treasury Robert Rubin called it "the life-blood of organized crime" after the completion of Operation Casablanca in 1998.⁸¹ That sting operation, which led to the arrest of 16 members of the Cali and Juárez drug cartels, also alleged that 12 of Mexico's 19 largest banks were involved in laundering activities.⁸²

It appears that money laundering is quite lucrative in Mexico. For one thing, the impediments to money laundering are far less in Mexico than they are in Colombia and many other countries. Because U.S. dollars are not a negotiable currency in Colombia, drug traffickers must go through at times complex money laundering maneuvers to repatriate their profits. Mexican drug traffickers have no such problems. As one U.S. official put it, "[T]hey don't have to launder per se. To a Mexican, to launder means to put a million bucks in the trunk and drive across the border to Tijuana."⁸³ Of course, Mexican traffickers typically use more sophisticated techniques, but the underlying point remains valid: Money laundering in Mexico is tantalizingly easy.⁸⁴

Those who would argue that there is almost no chance that Mexico will replicate Colombia's slide into chaos point to some crucial differences between the two societies. Mexico, they argue, has had an ultra-stable political system. That has been true historically—at least since the early years of the twentieth century. But that difference may be less dramatic than it might appear. Not long ago Colombia was widely hailed as the model of a stable

democracy in Latin America, in marked contrast to many other hemispheric nations that seemed to oscillate between periods of civilian rule and authoritarian (usually military) regimes. Moreover, Mexico's political stability may no longer be quite the same as it was during the decades of one-party domination by the PRI. Competing political forces have emerged, and while thus far most of the competition has been expressed peacefully through other political parties, that may not always remain the case. The potential at least for greater political instability now exists.

The most obvious and significant difference between Colombia and Mexico is that Mexico does not face an armed insurgency remotely comparable to that afflicting Colombia. (Nor does the Mexican government face the challenge to its authority posed by armed, right-wing paramilitary organizations the way the Colombian government does.) True, Mexican officials have identified some 14 rebel groups operating in the country, but virtually all of them are small, prone to factionalism, and capable of only pinprick attacks.⁸⁵ One such attack occurred in early August 2001 when the small but noisy People's Armed Revolutionary Front (FARP) detonated bombs outside Mexico City branches of a leading Mexican bank. The bombs were crude and did little damage, but the incidents shook an already jittery public alarmed by the growing violence related to the drug trade.⁸⁶

One rebel faction that does have significant capabilities is the Zapatista rebels in the southern province of Chiapas. A serious rebellion flared there in the 1990s, and despite talk of peace, reconciliation, and reform, there is little indication that the insurgents are about to disband. If that rebellion should reignite into full-scale warfare—much less if it should spread to other regions of Mexico with large indigenous Indian populations—Mexico could begin to face a threat comparable to that confronted by the Colombian government. For the moment, though, the government in Mexico City exercises a degree of territorial control that the Bogotá authorities can only dream about.

Another crucial difference is that there does not yet appear to be any significant linkage between insurgent groups and the drug-trafficking organizations. Nevertheless, the Fox government is sufficiently concerned about the upsurge of the drug trade in Chiapas and other portions of the southern border that it has ordered a reinforcement of both police and military units in the region.⁸⁷ That action suggests at least some concern on the part of Mexican authorities that the insurgents and the drug traffickers might eventually link up.

A less remarked on but significant potential for networks of organized violence and corruption exists with the *caciques*, or local political bosses. During the era of PRI political dominance, they acted as links between the party and their own private clientele, who wanted political favors. The *caciques* brought in votes for PRI candidates in exchange for those favors. The PRI has been badly weakened in recent elections—particularly with the victory of Fox, the candidate of the National Action Party. But the *caciques* remain, and with their sources of funding now greatly reduced, it would not be unthinkable for them to put their connections at the disposal of the drug cartels. Indeed, there was some evidence that this was already occurring during the administration of President Zedillo, Fox's predecessor.

U.S. policy seems to assume that if Mexico can capture the top drug lords, their organizations will fall apart, thereby greatly reducing the flow of illegal drugs to the United States. That is the same assumption that U.S. officials used with respect to the crackdown on the Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia during the 1990s. But there is little evidence to support such an assumption. The arrests and killings of numerous top drug lords in both countries have yet to have a meaningful impact in terms of decreasing the quantity of drugs entering the United States. For example, the most wanted Mexican drug trafficker in the 1980s was Rafael Caro Quintero, who led a drug-smuggling organization based in Guadalajara. After Quintero's gang murdered a DEA

agent, the DEA tracked him down in Costa Rica and arrested him. He eventually received a life sentence in a U.S. federal prison. But his drug organization did not die; rather, it was taken over by his brother, Miguel. Today the DEA still considers it to be one of Mexico's leading drug organizations.⁸⁸ As was the case in Colombia, cutting off one head of the drug-smuggling hydra merely results in more heads taking its place. U.S. drug policy in Mexico may simply serve to increase the number of drug-trafficking groups. It is likely to decentralize the problem, not solve it.

Of all the similarities between Colombia and Mexico, the most troubling may be the increasingly pervasive violence in the latter. No longer is just the cocaine and heroin trade characterized by violence. Today even the marijuana trade, which traditionally had generated little violence, is now accompanied by gruesome killings. Indeed, the biggest and bloodiest massacres over the past three years have involved marijuana trafficking.⁸⁹

There is still time for Mexico to avoid going down the same tragic path as Colombia, but time is growing short. If Washington continues to pursue a prohibitionist strategy, the warfare that has convulsed Colombia will increasingly become a feature of Mexico's life as well. The illicit drug trade already has penetrated the country's economy and society to an unhealthy degree. U.S. officials need to ask whether they want to risk "another Colombia"—this time directly on America's southern border. If they do not want to deal with the turmoil such a development would create, the United States needs to change its policy on the drug issue and do so quickly.