



U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM

State of Siege

by Denise Dresser

As I reflect on my troubled country, the lyrics of a Bruce Springsteen song come to mind: “We’re a long, long way from home... Home’s a long, long way from us.” And that’s how it feels to live in Mexico during these turbulent times: far from democratic normalcy; far from the rule of law; far from home and close to everything that imperils it. Always on the lookout, anxious, suspicious of our own shadow. Invaded by the legitimate fear of walking on the street after dark, taking money out of an ATM, hopping into a cab, being stopped by a corrupt policeman, receiving a kidnapper’s call, losing a son, burying a daughter. My home has become a place where too many people die, gunned down by a drug trafficker or assaulted by a robber or shot by an ill-trained law enforcement officer or kidnapped and strangled by a member of a criminal gang, as was the case with the teenage children of prominent businessmen Alejandro Martí and Nelson Vargas.

Given the increasingly lawless conditions of the country he inherited, President Felipe Calderón had little choice but to act, and he is to be commended for

doing so. The former ruling party that governed Mexico in an authoritarian fashion for over 71 years left behind a toxic legacy. During the 1980s, drug trafficking blossomed throughout the country as a result of political protection. Drug traffickers infiltrated the Mexican government, frequently aided and abetted by members of the Federal Judicial Police as well as state-level officials. The political structure built by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) allowed organized crime to swell, not despite the government but thanks to the blind eye it often turned.

After Mexico’s electoral transition to democracy in 2000, when members of the National Action Party (PAN) came to power, they discovered a precarious state of affairs but did little to confront the festering problems. Years of government inaction under former President Vicente Fox left key institutions infiltrated, hundreds of policemen dead, scores of judges assassinated, dozens of journalists missing. During the Fox administration, Mexico turned into a more violent country than Colombia; his successor’s task has been to recover lost ground and attempt to reconstruct the



Photo by darikolina tsukino.

Soldiers march across the Zócalo in Mexico City.

authority of the Mexican state. As President Calderón stated in a recent interview: “We decided to operate on the body politic and discovered that it had cancer.”

Dealing with a problem that is more widespread and embedded than President Calderón originally envisioned has not been easy because the surge of drug trafficking in Mexico reflects a painful paradox: the government’s drug enforcement efforts are undermined by the corrupting influence of the drug trade, yet the drug trade cannot survive without the protection of compromised elements within the government. Cocaine traffickers spend as much as \$500 million a year on bribery, which is more than double the annual budget of the Mexican Attorney General’s office. As a result, it frequently becomes difficult to distinguish those charged with policing smuggling from the smugglers themselves. Mexico is a place where, if you are the victim of a crime, the last person you call is a police officer.

In the face of police corruption, Calderón has turned to the military to take on the anti-drug effort. But bringing soldiers out of the barracks and moving them around the country at will is a cause for concern. As a result of its expanded role, the military is becoming the supreme authority — in some cases, the only authority — in parts of some states. And greater militarization is also leading to greater corruption within an institution that

has turned into the last credible beachhead in Mexico’s longstanding battle.

In order to be more effective, Calderón needs to deal with Mexico’s culture of illegality. Over the past decade, Mexico’s transition to democratic rule has cast a glaring light on the country’s precarious, uneven and limited rule of law. Saddled by inefficiency and corruption, the Mexican judiciary cannot establish, ensure or enforce the rule of law. Cases of official corruption abound — with former governors accused of drug trafficking — and the credibility of public institutions has suffered when those proven guilty have eluded punishment. As a result, impunity runs rampant.

Over the past decade, the surge in drug trafficking and the government’s unsuccessful efforts to contain its effects have been symptomatic of what doesn’t work in Mexico’s dysfunctional democracy. As George Orwell wrote, “People denounce the war while preserving the type of society that makes it inevitable.” Mexico has a political, economic and social structure that makes crime possible. It is a country characterized by politicians who protect drug traffickers and drug traffickers who finance politicians; by those who launder money and by the unregulated financial institutions that allow the practice to occur; and by judges who become accomplices of criminals and criminals who

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Photo from Getty Images.

Mexican Federal Police display an arsenal seized from a house in Sonora, near the U.S. border.

can bribe them. And although Felipe Calderón has declared that the Mexican state is “winning the war” against the drug mafias, the truth is that government institutions frequently shelter their members. Drug trafficking in Mexico is nurtured by extensive corruption and persistent impunity. It feeds upon a country where 75 percent of crimes are not reported due to lack of trust in the authorities, where 98 percent of crimes are never resolved or punished.

So while Calderón’s efforts are to be applauded, they must also be accompanied by comprehensive measures that entail more than soldiers on the streets. The prospects for a stable, less insecure Mexico will be contingent on Calderón’s capacity to enact a major overhaul of the country’s judiciary and law enforcement apparatus. It will be dependent on the government’s political will to confront corruption at the highest levels — something Calderón has been reluctant to do. In other words, Calderón needs to fight not only drug traffickers but also the political networks that protect them. Otherwise, his efforts to confront organized crime will be tantamount to trying to cure cancer with an aspirin. Otherwise, Mexico will continue to combat symptoms while ignoring their causes.

President Calderón has told the United States that the heightened level of violence is a result of government

efficiency in combating drug cartels, that the rise in executions is evidence of a firm hand and not an ineffectual one. But Calderón’s stance — and one he is forced to maintain due to political and electoral imperatives at home — side-steps structural problems that cannot be solved with more weapons, more bullets, more members of the military policing key cities, more blood on the streets, more simplistic solutions to complex dilemmas.

The current strategy — based largely on the increased militarization of Mexico — ignores high-level government corruption that no one really wants to combat. It ignores a police force so weak, so ill-trained, so underpaid and so infiltrated that good apples are spoiled by rotten ones. It ignores that U.S. military training of Mexican troops can end up empowering splinter groups like the “Zetas,” who leave the army to start up their own criminal gangs. It ignores that an enhanced military presence will probably result in more human rights abuses in a country where too many occur already. It ignores a concentrated, oligopolistic economic structure that thwarts growth and social mobility, forcing people across the border or into the drug trade in record numbers: 450,000 Mexicans are involved in the cultivation, processing and distribution of drugs according to a recent estimate. It ignores the existence of a permanent

underclass of 20 million people who live on less than \$2 a day and view drug cultivation as a way out of extreme poverty. Drug traffickers are becoming more powerful in Mexico due to persistent historic patterns that recent governments have failed to confront.

If Mexico is unable to deal with its domestic corruption, it won't matter how many troops are trained, how many weapons are shipped or how many helicopters are bought. Colombia has spent over \$5 billion in U.S. aid with mixed results: more security but no end to drug production. The lesson is clear: the main objective of the "war" that the Mexican government is engaged in should not only be the destruction of the drug cartels but also the construction of the rule of law.

At the same time, the United States needs to understand the enormity of the problem brewing in the neighborhood and the negative role it has played by largely ignoring the burgeoning drug trade in recent years. At first, President George W. Bush sought to engage Mexico on immigration and other issues, but after 9/11 the bilateral relationship was placed on hold by the war on terror elsewhere. As General Barry McCaffrey, former drug czar, recently declared: "During the last eight years we witnessed the disappearance of leadership in the area of anti-drug policy." The Mérida Initiative, through which the U.S. provides a small level of financial and military assistance, is a necessary but insufficient step given the urgency of the situation.

Mexico's crime-related ills have become a focus of attention among lawmakers, law enforcers and the media in the United States. Over the past several months, there have been more than eight congressional hearings, a segment on "60 Minutes" and numerous public statements made by key people in the American intelligence community, stressing Mexico's plight. While this sort of attention is welcome — given the seriousness of the problems the country faces — a panoply of inconsistent, disjointed, contradictory stances has generated ill will south of the border.

Mexico doesn't know whether it should pay more attention to those who advocate militarizing the border or to those who have come out against it, including President Obama himself. Mexico doesn't know whether the U.S. will make a concerted effort to stanch the illegal smuggling of guns into its territory or whether that topic will be shelved by the "right to bear arms" argument. Mexico doesn't understand whether it's being criticized in order to generate congressional support for further aid and deeper collaboration or whether recent criticism is just political posturing by those who would welcome a bigger wall between the two countries. Members of the U.S



Photo by Matt Schurteffel.

A sign outside a sporting goods store in Choteau, Montana.

government talk about the need for a "new paradigm" in the U.S.–Mexico relationship but then lop off \$150 million from the Mérida Initiative designed to enhance military cooperation and intelligence sharing. Members of the Obama team talk about a "strategic partnership" with Mexico, but then Congress ends a demonstration project to allow some Mexican trucks onto American highways, as required under Nafta. Mexico then retaliates by placing tariffs on 89 U.S. products, affecting \$2.4 billion in trade.

In the meantime, Mexican drug traffickers buy the arms that the U.S. sells; over 2,000 weapons cross the border on a daily basis, and many of them are sold in an illegal fashion. Mexican drug traffickers provide the cocaine that U.S. users demand; over 35 million American citizens are drug users. Mexican drug traffickers have set up distribution networks across U.S. cities because very little has been done to stop them from doing so. According to recent reports, drug trafficker Joaquín Guzmán has turned Atlanta into the Mexican cartels' East Coast distribution center for cocaine and other drugs. Atlanta's accessibility to key interstates, like I-95 and I-85, makes it a perfect hub for moving cocaine

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and marijuana and taking bulk cash back to Mexico. The city's fast-growing Mexican population, lured largely by the region's building boom, has provided excellent cover and resources for the cartels' U.S. emissaries. From there, cocaine is moved to New York, Pittsburgh, Miami, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

In the face of increasingly dire circumstances, the U.S. can help by promoting more antinarcotics operations within its own borders, of the sort espoused by Attorney General Eric Holder. The U.S. can help by clamping down on money laundering and the financial flows that have enabled Mexican drug trafficker Joaquín Guzmán to amass a billion dollar fortune and earn a place on the Forbes list of richest men in the world. The U.S. can help by addressing the demand for drugs in its own cities, and Secretary Clinton's and President Obama's recent remarks in this regard are most welcome. The U.S. can help by cooperating more and not less on security matters; by demanding more and not less accountability for the aid it offers; by insisting that, if Mexico wants a helping hand, it will have to clean up its own house and accept hard truths the government has tried to obscure.

Both Mexico and the United States need to understand that this is a war that will never be "won," that it will never end if the demand for drugs north of the border is not

stymied. To pretend that it can be won without dealing with drug consumption and demand-driven forces in the United States is to believe that one can stop an earthquake or a hurricane. For every drug trafficker who is caught, another one will emerge in his place.

As Detective McNulty says in the final scene of "The Wire" — the American television series that recreated the futile war against drugs in Baltimore — as he gazes upon his devastated city with a mixture of love and sadness: "It is what it is." His despair is shared by many Mexicans today as we pay a very high price for our inability to construct a prosperous, dynamic, inclusive, lawful country in which citizens aren't propelled into illicit activities in order to survive and criminals aren't protected by the government itself. But we are also paying a very high price for American voracity. And because of that, millions of Mexicans like myself feel a long, long way from home.

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In this 2008 bust, the Mexican army seized \$26.2 million cached in a house in Sinaloa.



Photo from Getty Images.