



Photo by Antonio Sierra/Associated Press.

U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM: SECURITY

Soldiers escort a 14-year-old U.S. citizen accused of four beheadings in Mexico.

Attacking the Roots of Insecurity

by Benjamin Lessing

There is no issue higher on the U.S.–Mexico agenda at present than security. The death toll from Mexico’s drug war hit some 34,500 by late 2010 and continues to climb at an alarming rate. The issue is dominating the Mexican political scene, with a massive citizen mobilization calling for a shift in President Calderón’s “war on narco” policies. In fact, concerns about safety now top the economy as the issue most important to voters. The seemingly unstoppable wave of violence is affecting U.S.–Mexico relations just as powerfully, simultaneously fostering cooperation among diplomatic, law enforcement and intelligence agencies and exacerbating long-standing fears, suspicions and complaints on both sides of the border. The participants in the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum knew all too well that there would be no easy solutions when the security session began; instead, a

tough-minded and sincere debate ensued, that brought out both the immense challenges and the need for flexible, creative and cooperative approaches.

The session began with presentations from the Council on Foreign Relations’ Shannon O’Neil and the former mayor of Medellín, Colombia Sergio Fajardo. O’Neil started off with a brief rundown of the situation in Mexico and the state of U.S.–Mexico security cooperation. She pointed out that, while Mexico’s overall homicide rates are low by Latin American standards, they have grown precipitously and spread geographically in a way that has left the Mexican public shaken. Moreover, the nature of the violence seems to be changing: new, more violent cartels like Los Zetas are replacing older, more traditional drug operations. These new cartels are diversifying into extortion, smuggling, kidnapping and

human trafficking, while at the same time “outsourcing” much of the dirty work to local street gangs. Drug dealers are thus coming into closer contact with the population, who feel that they are now involved in a war that they never wanted.

U.S.–Mexico cooperation is also changing, O’Neil said. The \$1.3 billion Mérida Initiative that began in 2007 was focused on two main goals: first, pursuing kingpins, cartel leaders and other “high-value targets”; and second, strengthening the rule of law, especially the federal police. According to O’Neil, the first took priority over the second, and though there were a record number of arrests and extraditions, the focus on bringing down the dons led to a spike in violence, while the underlying problem of corruption and weak state institutions persisted.

With Mérida up for review in 2009, the incoming Obama administration pushed for a course correction, adding two additional pillars: protecting the border in both directions and building more resilient communities, with an additional \$300 million from Congress to get it done. The track record, said O’Neil, has some bright spots. The increased investment signals the importance of the U.S.–Mexico relationship, and the new level of operational cooperation and information-sharing among key agencies and departments is like “night and day” compared to five years ago. Given the history of tension over issues of security, sovereignty and the border, this is no small feat.

Still, said O’Neil, challenges loom. First, there is a vacuum of leadership on the U.S. side, in terms of pulling together a coordinated team to work with Mexico. Second, the Mérida funds have been disbursed slowly and spent disproportionately on military hardware, short-changing social funding. She pointed out that even under Obama, only \$30 million for social projects has been approved, as compared with \$200 million under Plan Colombia, making the “holistic approach” still more of an aspiration than a reality. Finally, there are sensitive political issues at play for both countries. Mexico, always uneasy with anything that hints of U.S. military intervention, is increasingly unhappy about issues like lax U.S. gun laws and the circumstances surrounding the resignation of U.S. ambassador Carlos Pascual, who stepped down after leaked cables exposed his concerns about the efficiency of Mexican security forces. Meanwhile, the current U.S. Congress has shifted rightward, which augurs a more militaristic approach to border issues, less foreign aid due to a focus on deficit reduction and little hope for reforms to gun policy.

In sum, O’Neil argued that a broad consensus has been forged on both sides of the border to work together and to

take a holistic approach, but that it would take time, years maybe, for these efforts to yield real results. The upcoming elections in both countries, she said, would be crucial to whether the U.S.–Mexico security relationship moves forward or backward.

The other opening remarks were given by Sergio Fajardo, the mayor of Medellín from 2003 to 2007. A former professor of mathematics, Fajardo is known for the innovative urban policies his administration put into practice, as well as the precipitous drop in violence that occurred in Medellín on his watch. He began by emphasizing that solutions that work in one place cannot simply be copied. “Bad students copy answers, then they fail the exam,” he observed, adding that he hoped lessons could be learned from the experiences of Colombia and Medellín, that country’s epicenter of drug violence.

Fajardo pointed out that “something must be going wrong,” if after 30 years the violence that wracked Colombia has now spread to Mexico and Central America. His overarching argument was that underlying social inequalities and institutional weaknesses need to be addressed if a permanent solution to the problem of drug-related violence is to be found. Using a series of graphic metaphors, he argued that governments fail to deal effectively with the problem because they focus on capturing big-name drug dealers while ignoring the sources of violence and the drug trade. He first claimed that violence and inequality go hand in hand, that they are like two trees whose roots have intermingled in the “weed grass” of corruption and that it is impossible pull out one without pulling out the other.

He then presented his second metaphor, arguing that poor and marginalized youth look at the world of drug trafficking and see an open door, leading to something better. In fact, it is a series of doors, leading up the drug hierarchy and eventually, almost inevitably, to prison or death. But the young man with no work and no education — the so-called *nini*, “*ni trabaja ni estudia*” (neither works nor studies) — sees only the first door. The door is getting wider, said Fajardo, and all the other doors, those that lead to a legitimate job or other opportunities, seem closed. So the only thing to do is to narrow the door that leads to the drug trade and open the other doors. “We would like to lock it,” Fajardo said, “but that is impossible.” But, he continued, if we can close the “narco door” even just a little, we will keep many youth from entering.

Fajardo described some of the positive developments he sees in Medellín and Colombia. By focusing investments on public transport and public space, his administration sought to revitalize low-income areas

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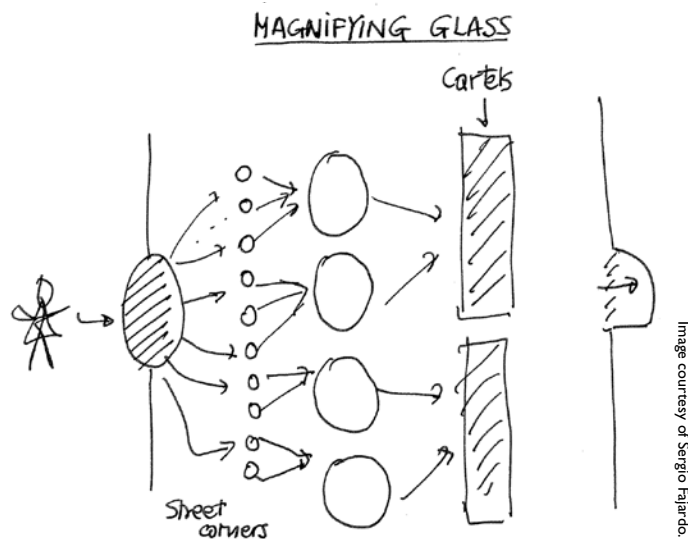


Image courtesy of Sergio Fajardo.

Sergio Fajardo's metaphorical sketch depicts the "series of doors" Mexican youths encounter.

and increase community involvement, getting people out on the streets and reducing fear. He also pointed to progress against corruption and towards a stronger judicial system at the national level, noting that some 50 Colombian congresspeople had been jailed for links

to the drug trade, a lamentable reality but an important signal to other politicians that corruption does not go unpunished.

Fajardo concluded by arguing that Latin American countries needed to take a united stand on the drug issue and support one another, as well as to remind the United States that "you are the ones consuming." He noted that although legalization is not yet a realistic political option, ultimately a more public-health-oriented approach is needed.

After the keynote talks, a fascinating debate ensued. Robert Collier, a journalist and visiting scholar at Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy, asked whether progress had been made on police corruption in Mexico, and if corrupt police can still get re-hired in other cities, as they had in the past. O'Neil responded that the new Plataforma México national crime database includes data on corrupt police, so that this practice should be curbed. But she agreed that corruption in the municipal police was still rampant and salaries very low. Fajardo recalled a visit to Torreón, where the mayor told him that he had fired 700 police officers upon taking office. "Where

Shannon O'Neil and Sergio Fajardo Valderrama.



Photo by Megan Kang.



Photo courtesy of the California Department of Justice.

California Attorney General Kamala Harris examines a car with U.S. agents at the Mexican border.

did you get 700 new police?” asked Fajardo, “Off the street?” Rafael Fernández de Castro, Presidential Advisor on International Affairs and Competiveness, 2008-11, and professor of International Affairs at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, pointed out that the real pay increases made under Calderón have been to army salaries, which have risen from 4,000 to 7,000 pesos per month (from about \$340 to about \$595), and that despite increasing combat deaths, there has been an increase in willingness to serve in the army. Fernández de Castro saw this trend as a mixed blessing: the army has gotten stronger, but in the long run, it really shouldn’t be involved in citizen security.

Chris Edley, dean of the Berkeley Law School, presented a provocative argument, claiming that, while U.S. policy elites admit among themselves that domestic drug policy is a failure, nobody can say so publicly, and any real reform would be politically toxic. So, he reasoned, change would have to come from some outside “shock” to U.S. drug politics. He urged Mexico and other Latin American countries to take more radical postures on the issue, saying to the United States, in effect, “Our people are suffering. We are not going to battle these forces within

our own countries any more. We’re going to legalize, use an excise tax and deal with the issue as a public-health problem.” This, he said, would actually be a boon to the United States, because it would force political elites to seriously address the issue.

Amalia García, governor of Zacatecas from 2004 to 2010, worried that even if legalization were to move forward, it would not address other types of organized crime. She recommended broad-based scholarships to low-income families to encourage students to stay in school. Steve Silberstein, co-founder of Innovative Interfaces, wondered how demographic trends might be exacerbating or easing the situation. Maria Echaveste of the Berkeley Law School picked up on Fajardo’s argument about inequality, arguing that it is an important issue in the United States, but that we have ignored it because we put a racial lens on inequality, with violence bottled up in ghettos and barrios. She worried that Mexico would head down the same road, “governing through crime, locking people up and ignoring structural inequality.”

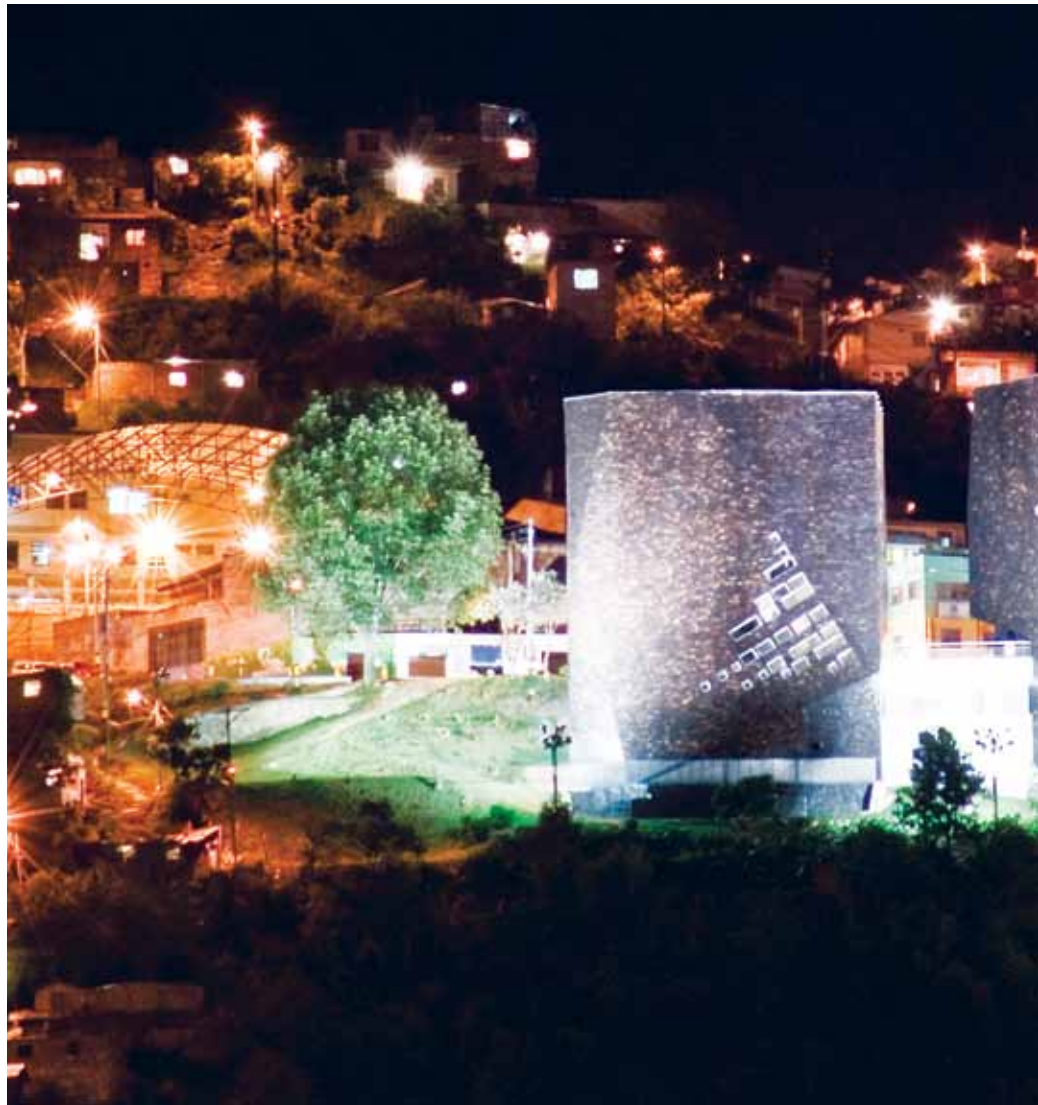
Texas State Representative Pete Gallego then raised a crucial point about the unintended consequences of “getting tough on crime.” He gave the example of

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forfeiture laws, one of which permits Texas officials to seize cars used in drug trafficking. In response, he said, drug dealers began using stolen cars to conduct criminal business. Similarly, when a law was passed allowing officials to seize the money of captured offenders, drug dealers began paying in product instead of cash. This forced couriers to become low-level dealers, pushing drugs in their own neighborhoods and thereby spreading the blight of drug consumption. Even more perversely, the distinction that U.S. laws make between adults and juveniles has led drug cartels to recruit kids under 18. Better policies can be formulated and implemented, but it takes time, money and effort. Gallegos summed up the point elegantly: “It’s much easier to be tough on crime than to be smart on crime.”

Berkeley professor Alex Saragoza identified factors that have exacerbated the problem in the last 30 years, especially technology. Mobile devices have facilitated deals, and financial instruments are now used to launder billions of dollars on the U.S. side. Cartels respond to changes in laws in one country by internationalizing their operations and taking advantage of legal loopholes or weak enforcement somewhere else. Finally, he argued that the United States has not done enough to close the door on its immense demand for drugs, which ultimately drives the market.

Harley Shaiken, Chair of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, drew together points that O’Neil, Fajardo and García had made to put the choices facing the United States and Mexico into stark perspective. Most of the aid from the U.S. is going toward helicopters not social programs. This approach takes out the capos but leaves the ranks of poor youth ready to walk through



This library in a poor neighborhood of Medellín, Colombia creates a safe public space.

the “narco door” and replace them. Even if the drug kingpins can be put away, a critical mass of criminality in Mexico retains the capacity to inflict damage on both sides of the border. So the decision for the U.S. is whether to continue to spend billions on wars like that in Afghanistan or to allocate sufficient funds to substantively address the growth of criminality in Mexico. The latter, Shaiken argued, is much more in the United States’ national interest.

Fernández de Castro offered his final reflections, saying that, in reality, U.S.–Mexico relations were not in good shape. With only a quarter of the Mérida funds disbursed, Mexico feels it is getting “all stick and no

carrot.” The U.S. Congress (as well as Amnesty International) has criticized Mexico’s human rights record but has not taken constructive steps to truly help. He asked O’Neil how she saw the relationship evolving, and he worried that any gains in Mexico would come at the expense of Central America, where institutions are even weaker than in Mexico.

O’Neil then offered a closing statement, making three points. First, she noted that the security situation and the government’s response is “all on Calderón”: it is seen as his own personal campaign not as a national project. Neither state governments nor other parties have really debated the issue or offered alternatives,



Photo by Daniel Estebaneri.

social upheaval as a result of their efforts to keep drugs from flowing to the United States. And the United States doesn't seem to care much. So, he concluded, Latin America needs to think for itself. He closed by urging Mexico to engage the problem at the highest level, creating a national youth program along the lines of Mexico's Oportunidades or Brazil's Bolsa Familia, both national cash-transfer programs. So, certainly no silver bullets but perhaps a few silver linings. The shadow of Colombia looms large over the debate on Mexico's drug war, and Fajardo's participation served as a reminder that a nation's security problems cannot be addressed by taking out a few drug kingpins, no matter how powerful they may be. At the same time, it brought home the opportunities that a security crisis can bring: a chance to truly tackle police and institutional corruption, to address at the national level the structural inequality and lack of economic opportunities facing Mexico's youth, and to forge a durable operational alliance with the United States. On the U.S. side, members of the Forum seemed to be in agreement that the biggest challenge will be to maintain and strengthen the will to cooperate and address underlying social issues in Mexico through the "holistic approach" and avoid back-sliding towards purely military solutions.

The panel "Security" was part of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum held in Berkeley, California, April 15-16, 2011. Shannon O'Neil, the Douglas Dillon Fellow for Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Sergio Fajardo, mayor of Medellín from 2003 to 2007, were the presenters.

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preferring to let the president take all the heat and all the responsibility. Increasingly, O'Neil said, this will become a national problem, and perhaps the time has come for a national debate. Second, she addressed the question of whether Mexico was headed for a turning point, arguing that such a time had come for Colombia when the economic elites agreed to pay an additional "public security tax" rather than continuing to buy more bulletproof cars and hire more bodyguards. A silver lining to the rising violence in Monterrey, Mexico's industrial capital, would be a decision by Mexico's elite to invest in the public good of security. Finally, she agreed that the future of U.S.–

Mexico security cooperation seems to be up in the air, but she added that the United States is generally willing to go along when the impetus comes from Mexico. So, if Mexico, together with Latin America, could lead, the U.S. would probably follow.

Fajardo concluded the session with a provocative claim: Americans don't really care about the drug problem. Neither do the Europeans. "This is an exaggeration," he clarified, but he stood behind the basic truth of his claim. In consumer countries, he said, the problem of drugs is basically under control. Consumption is a problem but not a crisis. Meanwhile, producer countries in Latin America suffer extreme violence and massive