A Brief History of the US Drug War History, Colombia, and Mexico

On June 17, 1971, President Nixon officially declared that America was entering a war on drugs. Since then the United States government (USG) has waged a long and unsuccessful battle against narcotics throughout the world.¹ For decades the US strove to achieve international drug control but has “singularly failed to achieve [this] objective,” on every occasion.² In examining how the US has waged this war, it becomes obvious that each administration’s approach is militaristic and unilateral. Looking at the US’s relationship with two of the world’s largest narco states, Colombia and Mexico, it is clear that the USG is more concerned with pushing their own unilateral and militaristic agenda than ones truly capable of affecting the international drug trade.

After the Nixon administration, America’s war on drugs remained stagnant until Ronald Reagan entered office. During the Reagan administration, America’s consumption of narcotics, particularly of cocaine, “exploded…like an atomic bomb.”³ Drug use and abuse gained such notoriety that the American public perceived it as a “threat” to “the very foundations of civilization.”⁴ Fearing the moral and social decline of America’s youth, President Reagan began the “second war on drugs.”⁵

Although the Reagan administration is responsible for the current strategy against narcotics, President Nixon played a pivotal role in shaping this

¹ Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy*, 11
⁴ Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy*, 20
⁵ Buxton, The Political Economy of Narcotics, 62
strategy and the institutions needed to implement it. In June 1969, Nixon assembled an interdepartmental grouping of the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Transportation (DOT), called “Task Force One,” a group that later evolved into the DEA in 1973.6

Building off of the actions of Task Force One, President Reagan formalized an American drug control regime that “aggressive[ly] pursued prohibition” through a mixed combination of eradication and interdiction strategies. Reagan’s Secretary of State, George Shultz, proclaimed drug abuse to be the “top priority” of both domestic and foreign policy, succinctly capturing the level of importance the administration now placed on criminalizing all activities related to illicit narcotics.7 The war against drugs became official government policy in 1986, when narcotics were declared a national security threat under NSDD 221. This mandate, which sanctions a hard-line approach against source producing countries, continues to define America’s policy towards narcotics.8 9

The preferred drug control tools for every administration have varied greatly, but each administration has maintained a strong adherence to the belief that narcotics must be stopped at their source. Some of the most frequently used source based approaches include: crop eradication, drug trafficking interception, and alternative development/crop substitution.

---

6 Carpenter, Bad Neighbor Policy, 15.
7 Ibid., 19
8 Ibid., 29 - 31
9 Buxton, The Political Economy of Narcotics, 62
programs. Another tool includes, *Decertification*, which represents one of the most obvious manifestations of America’s unilateralism in the War on Drugs. Described by Julia Buxton as a “carrot and stick approach,” decertification is a process where source-producing countries receive USAID funding for economic development and alternative crop programs only on the condition that the source-country cooperates with the desired US drug policy. If the country is perceived as uncooperative with USG’s demands then the State Department (DOS) can decertify that country, essentially black listing it from any chance of receiving USAID funds, which negatively affects the nation’s development by eliminating the nation’s economic crutch.

Decertification, among other tools, gives the United States considerable leverage over how countries pursue narcotics control within their own boarders. By threatening to withdraw economic aid, the USG can push nation’s to adopt a range of intrusive and unpopular domestic drug control strategies such as militarized crop eradication to traffic interdiction, which nations have little choice but to accept.11

The inherent problem with America’s “unilateralist ‘source focused'” approach is that it consistently fails to address the problems behind America’s demand for narcotics. When drugs are eliminated in one area a stopgap in production is created. With the demand for narcotics unchanged, drug kingpins search for new territory to grow their product, while the limited supply of

---

10 Ibid., 13, 21.
11 Buxton, *The Political Economy of Narcotics*, 63
12 Ibid., 62.
narcotics only increases their street price to the benefit of the illicit organizations involved. Scholars have called this cycle the *balloon effect*, or the *pushdown, pop-up effect*, where eliminating narcotics production in one place leads it to relocate in another. This cycle also occurs with drug trafficking. When the USG and the country it’s working with eliminate one drug route, another one instantly emerges.\(^{13}\) Despite how tough or strict the USG may become, all aspects of the current strategy have a limited long term effect on the illicit organizations involved. The US’ commitment to stringent prohibition only makes “drugs lucrative,” as the cost for narcotics “reflects the level of risk” required to grow, produce, traffic, and finally sell the product.\(^{14}\)

Colombia and Mexico have remained at the center of America’s drug war since the war began. Although the United States has been involved with other Latin American nations, none have received as much attention as these two countries. The reason for this attention varies: not only are both nations critical components in the illicit drug trade but they are also of extreme strategic importance to maintaining and furthering the interests of the USG. Although the USG may have different reasons for being involved with either nation; the two are linked through their attachment to the United States. The history of the US’ efforts to stop the illicit drug trade in Colombia and Mexico offers a prime example of the “push-down pop-up effect” and the inherent failures in America’s drug control philosophy.

At the time Nixon launched the drug war, Mexico was a heavy producer

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 107
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 101
of marijuana and was consequently placed at the top of administration’s hit list. In 1969, President Nixon’s Task Force One labeled Mexico as a “crucial source” of heroin, opium, and marijuana that made the country the “highest priority” for the USG’s eradication efforts. The USG immediately began to pressure the GOM into cooperating in an intrusive eradication campaign.

Failing to gain Mexico’s approval, the United States initiated Operation Intercept to “coerce” the Mexican government into agreement. Demonstrating the carrot and stick approach, the USG coerced the country into participation with intensive border inspections that essentially shut down the US-Mexican border, causing “massive economic and social disruption” for the Mexican economy. Unable to weather the economic repercussions caused by traffic delays along the border, the Government of Mexico (GOM) reversed their decision and allowed the US to commence with their eradication campaign. Although the amount of narcotics produced in Mexico was successfully reduced, drug lords soon relocated to Colombia, demonstrating the previously mentioned “pop-up” effect that occurs with an eradication strategy.

Shortly thereafter the cocaine epidemic exploded with Colombia at the center making the nation the new primary focus for America’s drug war. Traditionally a politically conservative country, Colombia and the US shared many commonalities that provided a strong foundation for the two countries

---

17 Ibid., 12 – 14.
18 Ibid., 12 – 14, 170.
relationship. Following the assassination of Colombian Presidential candidate, Carlos Galán on August 18th 1989, the USG began to seriously increase their militaristic assistance to the nation. After the assassination, it became obvious that control in Colombia had fallen into hands of the all powerful Cali and Medillin drug cartels. As Colombia became the world’s cocaine capital, the nation was in danger of becoming a failed state.

During the 1980s, the United States managed to wage a relatively successful battle against the major Colombian drug cartels. Although the FARC were still in existence, the eventual demise of the Medellin and Cali drug cartels in 1995 represented a tremendous success for USG’s decade long battle against these infamous Colombian cartels. In short order, the USG achieved success by restricting the financial assets of drug lords and cutting off their primary drug smuggling routes through the Caribbean. Once all of the Colombian operated smuggling routes were compromised, the Colombian cartels were forced to turn to Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) to traffic their illicit substances into the lucrative US market.\(^\text{19}\) Shortly thereafter, Mexican DTOs leveraged their position as the “middle man” to their benefit. Without access to cash, the cartels were forced to pay Mexican DTOs in narcotics, which gave the DTOs enormous power over both the trafficking and subsequent distribution of cocaine and other drugs throughout the US.\(^\text{20, 21}\)

The United States continues to remain in the midst of a battle against

\(^{19}\) Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy*, 170-1.
drug producers in Colombia and drug trafficking organizations in Mexico. Although the US’ military has continually had a large role in Colombia’s narcotics affairs, their activity wasn’t formalized until Plan Colombia was created. Plan Colombia and Mexico’s equivalent, the Meridia Initiative, legitimize the United States’ role as partner in both countries attempts to eradicate narcotics within their borders. Because the presence of drug producers and/or traffickers creates instability, the United States is able to act as a stabilizing force to benefit both the US and their partner countries.

Plan Colombia Explained

Although Colombia’s political stability increased mightily throughout the 1980s and 90s, the nation continued to produce cocaine. The end of Cali and Medillin Cartels in 1995 was symbolic of Colombia’s increased security. In the long run, however, the demise of these two cartels was only a minor success as their downfall failed to reduce the amount of drug’s leaving Colombia for the United States. Cocoa continued to flow out of Colombia unabatedly and by 1997 the nation surpassed Peru as the world’s largest cocaine producer. The presence of cocaine in Colombia created an influx of un-counted and un-taxed narco dollars in the economy leaving the nation economically crippled. Colombia’s civil-strife only exasperated this problem, making it unattractive to investors, which prevented substantial economic and social development from occurring.

22 Buxton, The Political Economy of Narcotics, 91-92
As a solution to these problems, Plan Colombia was introduced in 1998 during the presidential campaign of Andres Pastrana. Plan Colombia was Pastrana’s comprehensive strategy for the social and economic development of the nation, a critical component of which was focused on reducing cocaine production through alternative development programs. Regardless of Pastrana’s intentions, Plan Colombia was estimated to cost $7.5 million and would require a two-year period to implement, yet when Colombia was unable to find substantial international donors to cover the program’s cost, the USG was more than willing to fill the void.\textsuperscript{23} In July 2000,\textsuperscript{24} President Clinton agreed to assist Colombia with between $1.3 and 1.6 billion\textsuperscript{25} in aid to “strengthen [their] military capabilities and effectiveness.”\textsuperscript{26}

The United States has been giving military aid to Colombia for decades in order to prevent Colombia’s collapse. In 1997, the United States gave the nation $65 million in military aid\textsuperscript{27} and in December of that same year, the US became involved further by placing an aircraft carrier off Colombia’s coast. The aircraft carrier’s duty was to bolster the country’s increasingly weak ability to function as a nation as much as it was assigned to monitor and intercept the country’s sea-based drug routes.\textsuperscript{28} By involving the US military to such great

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Carpenter23} Carpenter, Bad Neighbor Policy, 59  
\bibitem{Carpenter25} 1.3 figure comes from Carpenter, 59 while 1.6 figure comes from Willam Avilés, 410  
\bibitem{Carpenter27} Carpenter, \textit{Bad Neighbor Policy}, 36  
\bibitem{Carpenter28} Carpenter, \textit{Bad Neighbor Policy}, 33
\end{thebibliography}
extent in Colombia’s affairs, the USG could not only prevent drug trafficking from occurring but the American presence also acted to deter revolutionary groups like the FARC. The FARC, with a fighting force of 18,000 rebels are currently the biggest and best-armed force in the western hemisphere that “[strikes] fear in the hearts of politicians in DC,” this fact has lead some to suggest that Plan Colombia was a ploy to “draw the US into Colombia’s civil war.” Others believed Plan Colombia was a sign that, “Pastrana clearly wants Washington to play a role in ending the insurgency…” This analysis is certainly plausible. Indeed, Tickner points out that the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 conjoined with the failed talks of demobilization between paramilitary and guerrilla groups lead the USG to label the FARC a terrorist organization and threat to US national security.

While the USG’s actions in Colombia are without a doubt slightly selfish and based on self interest, the fact remains that the FARC are partially funded by narcotics and thus the two are inextricably related. The links between guerrilla groups, drug producers, and paramilitary groups are blurred and these groups are inherently militaristic, thus there is no way that USG could be involved in stopping Colombia’s drug trade without also partially involving themselves in the nation’s civil conflict.

29 Dudely, Walking Ghosts, 169-70
Although it is possible that Plan Colombia’s militarism is part of the USG’s strategy to defend imperialist interests in the region as a means of “defeat[ing] leftist challenges” to their hegemonic power, Herbert Tico Braun puts things into perspective, stating that if the guerrillas weren’t heavily funded from narcotics profits, than “it is unlikely [they] would be paid any heed on the international scene. Yet as Carpenter pointed out in the 2001 issue of the CATO Institute’s Policy Report, it is unrealistic to expect that US donated military hardware will remain exclusively used for drug eradication. Not only do military operations against drug traffickers take place in areas heavily populated with guerrilla and paramilitary groups, but “narcotrafficking organizations are allied with one or both” groups, therefore drugs, violence, and civil strife in Colombia are all tied together.

Presidents Obama and Uribe are said to currently be discussing the possibility of opening five military bases in Colombia. If implemented, the military bases would “constitute an end-run around” attempts to make Plan Colombia less militarized. Yet, while most view this as a setback in the War on Drugs in Colombia, it can also be seen as an opportunity to re-orient Plan Colombia in a less militaristic approach. Plan Colombia has successfully implemented a limited amount of alternative development projects in

---

Colombia, but the trend seems to remain focused on a greater military force.

Proponents of Plan Colombia are quick to point out the nation’s increased security. During a statement made in 2005, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs, Roger F. Noriega, quoted several static’s highlighting Colombia’s radically improved security, stating, “Violent crime is at the lowest in 16 years...If public safety is a measure of well-being, most Colombians are better off today.” In reality, “security remains a privilege,” accessible to the privileged classes and city dwellers, while the countryside and forests continue to remain a highly contested and violate area.

Prioritizing security concerns over those of alternative development initially seem applicable, particularly with regards to Colombia’s widespread violence. But as Julia Buxton points out, many of the groups representing the greatest security concerns are funded by the sale of narcotics creating a “cycle of militarization and defense spending.” This cycle perpetuates the violence related to narcotics while simultaneously securing Colombia’s reliance on American defense firms to provide the equipment needed to fight drug cartels. Buxton points out that from Plan Colombia, several American defense firms were awarded various contracts of between $120 and $234 million for providing the Colombian military with various defense equipment and

---

38 Buxton, The Political Economy of Narcotics, 117
US and Colombia: Trying Alternative Development with Violent Results

Although Plan Colombia has clearly become a militaristic endeavor, it has implemented some alternative development programs, but even these programs are tied to violence. As the only equal alternative with “profits [that] can match coca profits” the Colombian government has pushed farmers to begin produce African palm oil. Efforts to increase the production of palm oil have come from both Colombia and the United States, through laws designed to “promote” the domestic use of biodiesel and money from USAID aimed to further stimulate palm oil production.

In 2001, with only 656 square miles (or 170,000 hectares) of land devoted to the production of palm oil, Colombia stood as the world’s 4th largest producer of palm oil and made more than $20 million in palm oil exports.

As Teo Ballvé noted in The Nation on June 15th, 2009, this was the same year that companies began producing palm oil in Chocó, a province of Colombia known for its “ethnic and environmental wealth” which provides the “optimal” climatic and geographic conditions required for the production of the oil.

---

43 Avendaño, “Colombia’s Palm Oil Biodiesel Push,” 2.
The province is not only a prime growing spot for palm oil, but its geographic proximity to Panama as well as access to both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans make it a “strategic corridor” for illicit activities such as drug trafficking.\(^{47}\) With time, the province has garnered a reputation as a “violently contested backwater” fought over by paramilitary and guerilla groups that has negatively affected and displaced a large number of Afro-Colombian who primarily reside in this region.\(^ {48,49}\)

As stated, the Chocó province is home to large amount of Afro-Colombians, and according to Colombia’s constitution, these individuals retain the same land rights as indigenous populations.\(^ {50}\) Despite their constitutional status, the Afro-Colombians in this region have little control over the 250,000 acres of land they were collectively rewarded by the government in 2000.\(^ {51}\) In 1997 paramilitary groups in collaboration with the military, executed Operation Genesis in an attempt to eliminate the presence of guerrilla groups operating in the region.\(^ {52}\) Carried out between February 24 – 27, Operation Genesis resulted in indiscriminate attacks on small villages and communities throughout the Chocó region that resulted in the forced displacement of an

---


\(^{49}\) OAS, “REPORT Nº 86/06.”


estimated 17,000 individuals and the death or disappearance of 140 individuals.\(^53\)\(^54\)

In 2001 paramilitary groups reportedly claimed that they had successfully “gained definitive control” over the land in the province believed to be occupied by guerrillas.\(^55\) According to Teo Ballvé it was during the interim years between 1997 and 2001 that paramilitary groups leveraged their “violence to an economic purpose,” by taking over the lands left unoccupied by displaced Afro-Colombian farmers and essentially selling the land to palm oil companies.\(^56\) A university professor was quoted in Ballvé’s article, stating that “Palm [is] a perfect way to consolidate...militarized social control over a territory and invest [illicit] capital into a profitable business.\(^57\)\(^57\) Further cementing the validity of these claims, a July 21, 2009 article written by John Lindsay-Poland accused paramilitary forces of “violently taking control of valuable lands,” making them responsible for the displacement of between 2.5 and 3 million Colombians, an amount which is only second to Sudan.\(^58\)\(^59\)

Mexico’s Drug Issues

Over the course of 71 years, the GOM and the Mexican DTOs developed

\(^{53}\) OAS, “REPORT Nº 86/06.”
an un-stated but mutually understood relationship of uneasy cooperation.\textsuperscript{60} During this time, a “mutually understood” relationship of bribery and political corruption developed between the GOM and DTOs. Aside from the occasional drug bust or arrest, Mexico’s DTOs held virtual impunity for their actions as the government silently took a blind eye towards their actions, allowing them to conduct business with little government interference.\textsuperscript{61} This system, however, changed with President Vicente Fox whose 2000 election brought a new ruling party into office and a promise to end the nation’s history of corruption.

President Fox fell was unable to make a significant impact, leaving the task to his successor and the current president: Felipe Calderón. Since his election in 2006, President Calderón has made ending state corruption, his “personnel commitment,” and one, which he has stuck to.\textsuperscript{62} Despite his best intention, this commitment has come at a cost. Because Calderón is attempting to end corruption, he has brought tremendous heat to DTOs, whose briberies and threats are a leading reason for corruption. Rather than simply focus on those guilty of corruption, President Calderón is directly attacking DTOs for instigating corruption. Almost immediately after his election, Calderon deployed 45,000 soldiers throughout the country to fight the DTOs.\textsuperscript{63} While this double-sided strategy may be the most effective way to combat the country’s corruption, it creates violence as a result of the government’s

\textsuperscript{61} Francisco, \textit{Current History}, 73.
\textsuperscript{63} “On the Trail of the Traffickers,” \textit{The Economist}, 30-32.
crackdown on DTOs who similarly respond with violence.

Since his election, President Calderon has deployed 45,000 military soldiers, in favor of local police officials to conduct seizures, arrests, and provide protection for citizens.\(^ {64}\) Although not ideal, Calderon’s decision to use the military over the police was forced by the level of corruption that persist throughout Mexico’s police forces.

Following Calderon’s deployment of the military, the USG came to Mexico’s aid. In 2007, the US and Mexico agreed to the Meridia Initiative, a three year aid package worth $1.4 billion, similar to Plan Colombia with the exception that Plan Colombia was initially proposed as a development project. Aid from the Initiative is to directly fund Mexico’s battle by providing military assistance.\(^ {65}\)

The well documented explosion of violence in Mexico since 2006 is a direct outcome of the government’s current crackdown on DTOs, who are now fighting the government as much as they are each other. The US aid package has done little to curb the nation’s violence. A 2008 report from the Joint Forces Command listed rampant corruption and violence in Mexico as indications that Mexico is in danger of a “rapid and sudden collapse.”\(^ {66}\)

The GOM and to a lesser extent the USG view the explosion of violence as a sign of sign of success. The logic for this claim is that increased violence is


a signal that the cartels are “disintegrat[ing]” under pressure\textsuperscript{67}. Although the US support for this view is much more ambiguous, the DOS stated in INCSR’09 that the violence “may be due to the success of” Calderon’s “aggressive anti-crime campaign”\textsuperscript{68}. In reality, this reasoning is highly questionable. The \textit{Economist} point out that although since 2006 nearly 10,000\textsuperscript{69} people have died related to drug violence, of those murdered 4/5 are criminals killed by rival gangs in turf wars and Mexico apparently continues to have a “relatively low murder rate” of only 11 people per 100,000.\textsuperscript{70}

Many view the increased violence as indication of Mexico’s “deteriorating...situation,”\textsuperscript{71} and many are worried that if Calderón’s war isn’t successful his administration could quickly become unpopular and his efforts could backfire upon him.\textsuperscript{72} Of great concern is the mental shock created by the violent and often public means in which murder is conducted by the DTOs that range from publicly displayed beheadings to video-recorded murders on YouTube\textsuperscript{73}. These acts of narccoterror are but a few worrisome indicators that the drug cartels are succeeding in their “psychological war against the Mexican state.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{69} González, \textit{Current History}, 75.
\textsuperscript{70} “On the Trail of the Traffickers,” \textit{The Economist}, 31.
\textsuperscript{72} Seelke, \textit{CRS Report for Congress}, 15.
\textsuperscript{73} O’Neil, “Helping Mexico Help Itself” \textit{Expert Brief}.
\textsuperscript{74} González, \textit{Current History}, 75.
This violence, first noted by the Joint Chiefs Command, is an increasingly grave and serious problem for the United States. The 2009 National Drug Threat Assessment labeled Mexican DTO’s and their gang affiliates as representing “the greatest organized crime threat to the US” with an estimated presence in 230 American cities, if not more.\(^7^5\) The threat of Mexican DTOs is only increasing, since July 2005 DTOs have carried out 131 executions on American soil, increasingly fire upon US Border Patrols, and some report the Zeta cartel now instructs members to engage US law enforcement if they intervene in their operations.\(^7^6\)

The increased level of violence in Mexico and the failure to eradicate narcotics in Colombia after decades of involvement, is a clear indicator that the USG’s current militaristic strategy is not working. Many have attributed the rising level of violence to the military’s increased pressure on Mexico’s DTOs thus the increase in military aid from the US can only make the problem worse.

**Conclusion:**

We can see from Colombia’s past, that there no winning solution or formula to win the War on Drugs. Since 1971, the USG has adopted every imaginable method to eradicate narcotics and not a single one has successfully worked. Although Colombia’s security situation has greatly improved since Plan Colombia began, the US has made no progress in their attempts to end the

---


nation’s ties to narcotics. Guerrilla groups like the FARC will continue to fight and will continue to receive funding from narcotics; it is virtually impossible for the US this link, yet they continue to try and do so. Recently, President Obama and Uribe have discussed the possibility of installing five air force bases in Colombia, which suggests that the USG will continue to pursue a militaristic strategy of narcotics eradication.

While the US policy towards Colombia seems fairly set, the Obama administration has the ability to take a different approach in Mexico. Although the level of corruption of the police in Mexico requires that the country turn to the military over the police, there is little doubt that doing so will most likely result in human rights abuses. In adopting a militaristic approach to drug eradication, civilian authority is weakened as military forces are increasingly used to solve domestic problems. Although the proliferation of narcotics is an international problem, using the military to stop narcotics at the source places military forces against their fellow citizens. The disconnect between the military and civilians is widened by the US’ involvement which “locks [the military] into US-defined missions and strategies” further eroding their connection to area in which they are operating.  

The human rights abuses witnessed in Colombia are a product of increased reliance upon the military to perform what is seen as a primarily internal issue and normally reserved for police, and it seems likely that the same will occur in Mexico.

Indeed, recent talks between President Obama and Mexico’s President

---

77 Buxton, The Political Economy of Narcotics, 133-135
Calderon have made it apparent that both administrations are determined to fight Mexico’s DTOs with all the force available. This militaristic approach can only increase Mexico’s instability as DTOs become increasingly violent in opposition to the government’s force. The USG should be trying to reduce Mexico’s violence, which if left unresolved poses a direct threat to not only Mexico, but the US as well.

The only war on drugs that the US can win is one that focuses on demand reduction. Although many scholars and policy analysts have suggested that the US legalize drugs or at least decriminalize them, this is an unrealistic expectation. For nearly 40 years the USG has operated from a stance that views narcotics as criminal and this view has likewise been adopted by the American public. The best policy and least controversial, would be one that reduces America’s demand for drugs. Despite fervently fighting the proliferation of narcotics, the US remains the world’s consumer of drugs. If the US were to attack drug producers and DTOs by eliminating their consumer, then the US would significantly reduce the power of these actors while preventing violence and human rights abuses from continuing to occur.

---

78 Clinton, “Remarks.”
References:


Bustamante, Michael and Sebastian Chaskel. “Colombia’s Precarious Progress.”


Clinton, Hilary Rodham. “Remarks with Mexican Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinosa After their Meeting.” Remarks by Secretary Clinton: March 2009. U. S. Department of State.


Dudley, Steven. *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia*


