

# THE WAR ON DRUGS: A MEXICAN PERSPECTIVE

Hugo B. Margain

**The relationship between Mexico and the United States is a very peculiar one, since, economically speaking, one country belongs to the North, while the other, on its very border, belongs to the South. The relation not only transcends the geographic framework, but extends to many aspects of the domestic life of both nations, with not always fortunate results. However, it is undeniable that there exists a common desire to make this relationship a harmonic one, and to make it better all the time through agreements, cooperation pacts and other ways. Narcotics is perhaps one of the most crucial issues in the bilateral relationship today. The theme is analyzed here by Hugo B. Margain, whose proposals should be taken into consideration.**

Talk given at the University of California, San Diego, as part of the Helen Edison Lectures Series, April 24, 1990.

Bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States have been very difficult ever since our nations achieved independence.

Our most important challenge is to try to handle mutual problems in such a way as to avoid unnecessary conflict. That is the principal contribution we can provide for this and future generations.

In the crucial matter of drug abuse, the Mexican and U.S. governments are joined together in opposition to the production, trafficking, and consumption of narcotics, and also against the "money laundering" and so-called banking secrecy that cover up the illegitimate profits of the criminal narco-trade. Even so, we encounter basic issues that are poisoning the otherwise positive relations between Mexico and the United States. That is really an unfortunate irony: since we agree on the substance of the problem, it is unreasonable for us to have bilateral conflicts about it.

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Yet at the moment, we have profound differences with U.S. policies over four issues:

- 1) the unilateral "certification" or "decertification" by U.S. authorities of anti-drug campaigns in other countries, including Mexico;
- 2) the presence of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and its agents in Mexico;
- 3) the problem of so-called "hot pursuit" of smugglers across the border into Mexican territory; and
- 4) the proposal for a "continental army" to combat the problem of drugs in Latin America.

All of these issues have serious and negative consequences for the relationship between the United States and Mexico.

First, the process of "certification" represents a unilateral attitude by the United States that Mexico finds offensive and unwarranted. We do not believe that the U.S. executive or legislative branch has any right to pass judgment on our efforts to deal with the problem of drugs any more than we have a right to evaluate the achievements of Mr. William Bennett.

We need, instead, to respect one another. Crime in Washington DC is a serious problem, but the prosecution of criminal gangs that distribute drugs to American



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citizens is a matter for the United States to handle. We Mexicans realize that you are facing a serious social and political problem in the U.S. We do not take it upon ourselves to pass moral judgments. We do not attempt to "certify" the policies of other countries. We stand ready to cooperate and to coordinate our efforts. But we do not intend to judge our neighbors.

Every year, the U.S. president sends to the Senate his opinion regarding our policy. The Senate can ratify or amend this executive recommendation. Almost every year, some Senators take the opportunity to denounce our policies and to describe what they think is wrong about Mexico.

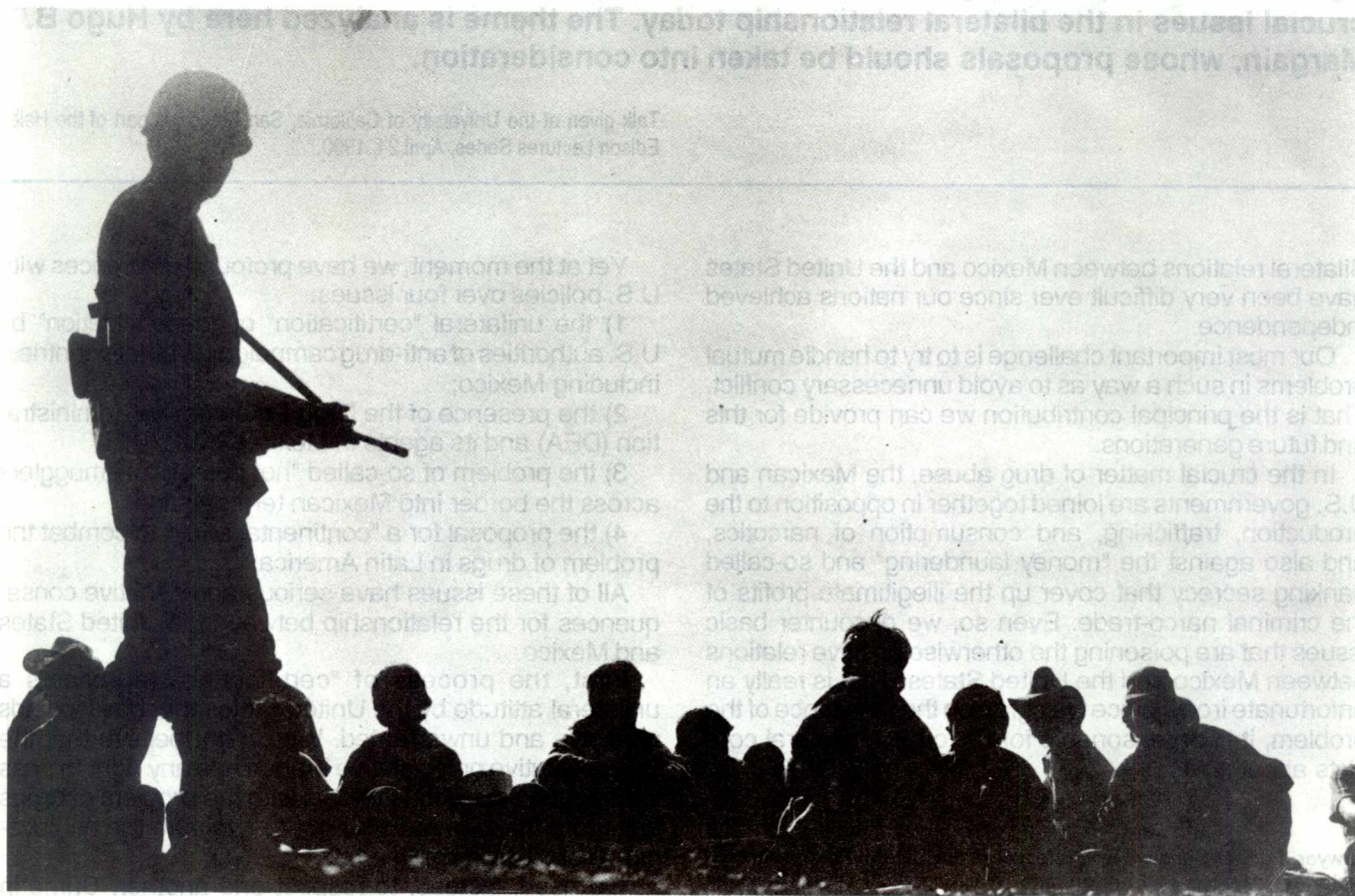
If Mexico were to be "decertified", it would lose its entitlement to the Generalized System of Preferences, a system of non-reciprocal and non-discriminatory tariffs. Mexico would also lose U.S. approval of financial support from international banks. At this point in our development, just as we are emerging from a prolonged period of economic crisis, we cannot afford such adverse measures.

We Mexicans think it is a mistake to mix multilateral economic issues with bilateral political issues. Like other countries, we both must adhere to the rules of the GATT. We do not believe it is appropriate for the United States to "punish" other, smaller countries with commercial or financial weapons on the basis of allegations about drug production or trafficking.

### A Multilateral Matter

In December 1988, at a United Nations meeting in Vienna, both our nations accepted the principle of collective responsibility. According to this convention, the U.S. and Mexico (plus other signatory countries) agreed to send to Vienna annually all sorts of information on anti-drug policies. United Nations authorities will produce an annual report on the subject, but they will first send a draft of the report to each member country, to give authorities the chance to make comments for inclusion in a general report that is to be submitted to the U.N. General Assembly. The resulting opinion will not be merely U.S. opinion, or Mexican opinion, but a multilateral, United Nations opinion on what we, both Mexico and the U.S., are doing to deal with the crucial matter of drugs.

That is why we are seeking, for the good of our bilateral relationship, the elimination of this unilateral "certification" by the U.S. The published report from the United Nations will proclaim to the world what our countries are doing, according to procedures accepted by both our countries at the 1988 convention in Vienna.



Agricultural workers, arrested for growing marihuana. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina





"Campaign against Drug Trafficking". Photo by Carlos Taboada/Imagenlatina

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The unilateral process of "certification" will never be accepted by Mexico. Until it is overthrown, it will continue to be, as it has been, a constant source of deterioration in our bilateral relationship. The multilateral procedures adopted at Vienna are far superior to the unilateral and unjust process followed by the U.S. We do not and will not accept it.

Second, the presence of the DEA in Mexico, though established by mutual agreement, has become a serious point of friction: the assassination of DEA agent Enrique Camarena in 1985 remains a prime example. Moreover, the recent decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (that DEA agents can enter houses in foreign countries without search warrants), creates another bilateral problem. The current dispute over the seizure and kidnapping of Dr. Humberto Alvarez Machain, who was taken from his office in Guadalajara on April 2 and transferred to the United States, offers an example of this problem. (A gynecologist, Dr. Alvarez is alleged to have been involved in the torturing of DEA agent Camarena.)

**U.N. Experts**

The operation of foreign police on our soil is bad for our relations and bad for both our countries. I believe that the solution is to replace DEA agents with experts from the United Nations who will operate according to the 1988 Vienna convention. This would bring a great improvement in our bilateral relations.

Under this plan, any country could ask this multilateral organization for assistance in the battle against drugs and drug trafficking. Highly skilled experts in modern techniques for dealing with the production, traffic, and consumption of illicit drugs will be made available through the United Nations. There will be sociologists for dealing with psychological problems, medical specialists for helping addicts, and law-enforcement agents to help uphold law and order. If Mexico asks the United Nations for such help in combating drugs and drug traffickers, there will be no further need for the DEA. This will remove a major source of contention between our two countries.

At the same time, we can produce information for the United Nations. We will also produce information for the United States -and we would like to receive information from the United States as well. That will be the best way to enhance our good relations and to avoid the unnecessary confrontations that have been poisoning our bilateral relationship, and, at the same time, weakening our efforts to combat the drug trade.

We share, Mexico and the United States, the same basic purpose: to avoid the production, trafficking, and consumption of illicit drugs. We would like to see fewer



**We – the U.S. and Mexico – share the same basic purpose: to avoid the production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs**

people consuming fewer drugs in both our countries. Given this fact, it seems utterly inconceivable that we should always be quarreling because of two counterproductive instruments in the fight against drugs: the policy of "certification" in the U.S. and the presence of the DEA in Mexico. It would be much better to have a multilateral solution to these problems. That can be found in the 1988 U.N. Convention, which has now been signed and ratified by both our countries.

**Respect for Sovereignty**

Third, we are opposed to the idea of "hot pursuit" across our boundaries. On this the Mexican position is very clear: the United States is in charge of its "drug war" within its own territory, just as we are in charge of the implementation of our own policies, with our own means. The sovereignty of Mexico continues to be a very sensitive issue for us, due to the fact that, in the past, we have suffered several armed interventions from the U.S.

Fourth, we are against the idea of a so-called "continental army" for fighting drug traffickers, and for this same reason: we are opposed to any kind of blockade, satellite surveillance, or any other such measure that would constitute foreign intrusion on our land.

The 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which I have mentioned before, establishes the principle of coordination among participating nations -- and, at the same time, the principle of absolute respect for national sovereignty. We Mexicans feel especially strongly about these two principles: coordination, on the one hand, and non-intervention, on the other.

Notwithstanding such differences of opinion, Mexico will continue to exchange information with other nations (including the United States) and to support the U.N. Convention because we believe that narcotics abuse and gangster organizations involved in the traffic represent a genuine threat to our nation.

In summary, we stand ready to cooperate with the U.S. within the framework of the U.N. convention. We look forward to increasing multilateral action in this area. And above all, we seek to avoid bilateral confrontation with the U.S. in an area where we share the same policy goals.

As for U.S. policy, we think it has been unreasonable and unfair for your political leaders to claim that the damage to American society and citizens comes from abroad, that it is the fault of so-called "producer" nations. The simple fact is that the United States has the world's largest consumer market for illicit drugs. U.S. production of marijuana and other drugs is also steadily increasing. If it is good to destroy narcotics abroad, it is more important to destroy them at home.

In other words: if Mexico were to stop all its drug production and trafficking tomorrow, you would still have

a massive drug problem here in the United States; but if the U.S. were to eliminate all its consumption tomorrow, we would no longer have a problem in Mexico.

Referring to the recent presidential summit in Cartagena, Colombia, the *Los Angeles Times* said in an editorial:

"Rather than going there to tell foreign presidents what to do in their countries to solve our problem, it would be symbolically more precise to have them come to the United States, where both the problem and the solution are to be found.

"The most important front is here, at home. The United States won't taste the first fruits of victory in fighting drugs until it starts blaming foreigners for the problem less, and does more to clean up its own act at home." (Mexico City News: February 19, 1990.) I could not agree more.

Another editorial in the same paper states: "Many Latin Americans resent the heavy hand of the "gringo" superpower to the North; they resent the hypocrisy of being asked to divest themselves of one of their few cash-rich crops; they fail to understand the dispatching of troops and ships to waters off the Colombian coast when the real drug battlefield is in the cities of the United States where drug traffickers control too much territory, terrorize too many frightened citizens and hook too many future mothers and present children on cocaine." (Mexico City News. February 17, 1990).

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I also agree with Luis Kraav, who published an article entitled "How to Win the War on Drugs". To him, and to me, the answer is clear: "Victory begins and ends at home". There is no other way. The emphasis must be on education, prevention, and treatment – at home.

Another recent editorial, this time in the *Baltimore Sun*, under the title "Anti-Drug Crusade and U.S. Habit", presents a thoughtful assessment of the Cartagena conference: "Bush was wise to admit in a Latin setting that the U.S. appetite for cocaine must be curbed by education, treatment and tough law enforcement, if the U.S. is ever to be part of the solution rather than a root cause of the problem".

**The Source of the Tragedy**

We can hardly deny the wisdom of President Barco's assertion: "... the only law the narco-terrorists do not break is the law of supply and demand". I might add that no country in the world can break the law of supply and demand for drugs. That is the source of our global tragedy.

Over the past several years I have worked with a Bilateral Commission on the Future of United States-Mexican Relations, an independent group of distin-





Tons of cocaine captured by Mexican authorities. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina

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guished citizens from the two countries that produced a major policy report in late 1988. In our chapter on the drug issue, we emphasized the critical need for both governments to "recognize that demand for drugs within the U.S. is the driving force for illicit drug production and traffic in Mexico". Our commission also observed that: "International efforts to control supplies at the source have continued to be a key factor in U.S. drug policy...". And as a result, the commission concluded, it should be as important "to eradicate illicit drug production within the United States" as well as within my own country.

Our bilateral commission also recommended that both the U.S. and Mexican governments "take the lead in promoting an international campaign against illicit drugs, in keeping with principles adopted by the U.N. Convention at Vienna in June 1987". (Now we can add the 1988 Convention too.) The report goes on:

"Such a campaign could include the creation of an international drug agency to assist governments that request help in eradication and interdiction campaigns. This group should be located within the United Nations. It

could replace the enforcement personnel associated with existing bilateral narcotic control agreements, such as those between Mexico and the United States (meaning, of course, the DEA). The performance of enforcement functions by a multilateral agency would thus help to reduce conflicts in bilateral relations – between consumer and producer countries."

The war on drugs, as we know, has many difficulties. It is further complicated by the presence of political considerations. In 1969, for instance, "Operation Intercept" had more political motivation than a genuine desire to reduce the trade in narcotics. And from our vantage point today, we can see a long list of programs, operations, plans and policies, that were born and died for essentially political reasons.

Today's war on drugs is, in its essence, a political issue.

The indestructible link between production, traffic and consumption gives way to a war of words: "You are to blame", and it is heard all over the world.

If all crops of natural drugs in any producer country were to be destroyed, the consumption of drugs would continue: the gangsters in charge of the market would simply obtain alternative supplies elsewhere. Other countries will provide them. Distribution will continue through the vast network of the illegal market, and it will continue to provide drugs for millions of addicts and users.

#### **Educating against Consumption**

On the contrary, if there is no consumption, the success will be permanent and definitive. The ancient slogan, "no



demand, no supply", can be applied to this illegal market. That is the history of economics. Let us take only one example: during one historical era, the production of lace was very important in order to satisfy a whim of social fashion. When fashion changed, no one produced any more lace. The same could happen today with narcotics.

Evidence shows that, when there is a real campaign against the production of drugs, retail prices immediately tend to rise. So users look for substitutes, but they continue their habits. Suppose there are no more crops of coca leaves. Addicts will turn to an alternative: marijuana, heroin, a "designer drug", or perhaps "ice". Chemical industries are now actively producing synthetic drugs that are just as potent and dangerous as the natural drugs.

It is impossible to halt the traffic in drugs so long as people want to consume them. It is impossible to jail the millions of users and addicts. It is impossible for any government to baby-sit all its citizens.

The long-term commitment must be to educate the citizenry, to inform the public, and to persuade the people against the use of drugs. In a free society, that is our only weapon. Let us explain the terrible and negative consequences of drug use and abuse on their minds, on their bodies, on their families, on their communities, and on their country.

Let us prohibit the promotion of drugs. Let us eradicate the glamorization of drugs.

With regard to law enforcement, the most essential step is defining the target population. The most important,



The Mexican Army collaborates in the anti-narcotics campaign. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

**"The only law that narco-terrorists do not break, is the law of supply and demand"**

and most dangerous, are the gangsters who gain enormous profits from their criminal dealings. The policy question is how we can destroy the gangsters and their profits. It is good to prosecute the laundering of money, as we agreed at Vienna in 1988. If we can launch a worldwide campaign against traffickers and their profits, we can hope for a chance of success.

We can agree that the problem has various facets: production, trafficking, and consumption. We can also agree that the most important enemy is not the users in the United States or the *campesinos* in Latin America, but the traffickers, and the corruption they spread throughout society.

Why do people take drugs? For the United States, the Korean War and the Vietnam War had many terrible consequences, including drug addiction among American soldiers. In addition to these wars, we also need to consider two major problems of the modern world: the arms race, and the existence of thermo-nuclear weapons. They are really one and the same. And their impact upon young people is devastating.

The tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed the balance of human existence. We are, now and forever, uncertain about the future. New generations know that. Consciously or not, they realize that the first atomic war will be the last. And this realization helps explain the tendency for today's youth to turn to drugs. In the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese coined a poignant phrase: "Death came from heaven". During our own revolution in Mexico, from 1910 to 1920, we lost a million lives. One of our popular songs philosophized: "If I am going to die tomorrow, why not die today". Even in this era of détente, glasnost, and perestroika, that is a condition that the whole world contemplates.

Let us destroy the cause of that uncertainty – through disarmament. Let us destroy the temptation to indulge in drugs.

Let us also meet the challenge of development, the problem of merging prosperity with justice. *Campesinos* produce drugs because they are trying to assure survival for themselves and for their families. We Mexicans are in favor of channeling the resources now wasted on arms toward education, housing, and health, and toward the reduction of poverty throughout the world. Let us use our resources in favor of liberty, peace, and development. Let us invest the "peace dividend" with wisdom and compassion.

In Chinese ideograms, the idea of crisis is depicted by two symbols: danger and opportunity. Though we now face great dangers in the threats of self-annihilation through nuclear holocaust or self-destruction through drugs, we also face great opportunities. Let us work together to seize the chance for mutual advancement, bilateral respect, and the promotion of drug-free societies for both of our countries. ■