

The Costs of Violence as a Strategy For U.S.-Mexico Border Security

Pablo Cabañas Díaz*



Ignacio Ruiz/Cuartoscuro

Unprecedented levels of violence, including clashes inside and between the drug cartels, and between them and the Mexican military, have pushed the United States to publically recognize its role as the cause of violence south of its border. During her late March 2009 visit to Mexico, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the “insatiable” demand for drugs in her country forced it to take “joint responsibility,” and therefore, to help Mexico in its fight against the cartels. In this context, the border security strategy President Barack Obama announced March 24, 2009 is an attempt to begin to correct the mistakes of U.S. anti-drug strategy.

The emphasis on reducing consumption is a timid turn that began at the start of the Obama administration when, in May 2009, he reported that while he would not stop trying to put the brakes on supply, the discredited concept of the “war against drugs,” coined by Richard Nixon in 1969, would disappear from official language. In his 2011 budget proposal, Obama requests a 13.4 percent increase (about US\$5.6 billion) in resources to fight consumption. Even given this, however, it can hardly be termed a “balanced approach,” since resources to suppress supply, both inside and outside the United States, come to more than triple the amount earmarked for programs to reduce demand.

The last time there was an attempt to emphasize prevention was during William Clinton’s administration. In a famous government-financed study, the Rand Drug Policy Research Center proposed transferring US\$3 billion of anti-narcotics

* Professor at the Center for Communication Studies of the UNAM School of Political Science and member of the Mexican Association of Communication Researchers.pcabanas@correo.unam.mx.

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police budgets to prevention and treatment programs. However, Barry McCaffrey, the controversial military man who at that time was the country’s drug czar, rejected the idea. Today, it is public knowledge that McCaffrey, a consultant to Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office, has been accused in the U.S. press of having been motivated by a conflict of interest, given his role as a paid advisor to the arms industry.

THE FAILURE OF THE ANTI-DRUG WAR

Clearly, in Washington, a broader consensus is being structured around the idea that the so-called “wars against drug trafficking” have been a failure. This means that it is necessary to put an end to them and to come up with a new strategy to deal with drug consumption and trafficking. Along these same lines, a speech by Mexico’s Minister of Defense General Guillermo Galván Galván is quite noteworthy: at the February 19 Army Day celebration, he said that if the war against drug trafficking goes on too long and the confrontation is prolonged excessively, not only will the number of innocent victims increase, but it will also cause additional damage to the populace because people “could end up getting used to the culture of violence.”¹

In an essay in *Nexos* magazine, writer Fernando Escalante mentioned a key piece of information: before the “war” against the drug kingpins, the homicide rate had been falling.² Taking into account the increase in the population, homicides have dropped an estimated 20 percent nationally in the last decade. In a clear downward trend, Mexican rates are relatively low in regional terms. Again, the numbers belie the justification for the “war.”

On September 21, 2006, then President-elect Felipe Calderón recognized that the drug trafficking phenomenon “threatened the Mexican state.” Calderón and his advisors began his term with the launch of the Michoacán Joint Operation, with firm intentions, but with zero short-, medium- or long-term strategies for recovering territories and areas of the country. This operation in Michoacán (the state where more soldiers have died in anti-drug actions than any other)

was followed by seven other troop deployments, particularly to the northern part of the country. The cartels responded by sending commandos to different locations and shoring up their presence in places the federal government was trying to recover.

A clear case of failed strategy is the Chihuahua Joint Operation and its expansion, begun in January and February 2009 in Ciudad Juárez. In 2010, this operation’s failure has been fully consummated, and the federal authorities have only managed to defend themselves by arguing that the results will be seen in the long term.

However, the military presence has not slowed down drug-cartel activity, and the proof is that their financial structures remain intact. Therefore, the result of this “war” is that the Mexican cartels, in addition to their growing violence domestically, are an increasing threat for U.S. national security, thus reinforcing the image among the public that Mexico is experiencing a severe crisis.

U.S. CONCERN

It should be noted that at his first press conference after taking office, Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta pointed to Mexico as an area of particular interest for his job. He stated that Mexico was an area of concern because of the drug wars taking place there, and that President Calderón had faced the issue bravely, but that it was an area the United States would be paying a lot of attention to.³ Meanwhile, former Arizona governor and current Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano told Congress that the violence unleashed in Mexico due to the fight against the drug traffickers is reaching levels and degrees never seen before.

And it is true. This violence and the security crisis in Mexico have reached extraordinary levels in the last two years. In some parts of Mexico, security has deteriorated so significantly that middle-income Mexicans —not just the upper classes— are emigrating to the United States, despite the economic crisis there and the resulting loss of job opportunities north of the border.

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Few areas of Mexico remain immune to this violence, with the resulting economic costs this implies. The states of Mexico most affected are beginning to experience a reduction of economic activity, visible, for example, in the decline in investments and tourism and the drastic increase in the cost of services like private security and bodyguards.

FORECASTS ABOUT THIS WAR

This scenario had already been visualized in 1996 in the book *The Next War*, by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Peter Schweizer. In the 50 pages dedicated to Mexico, they emphasize that drug trafficking and corruption have the upper hand in our country.

Later, in a report to the Senate February 16, 2005, then-CIA Director Porter Goss warned that the 2006 Mexican elections could bring instability since, in his view, they would slow the advance of the fiscal, labor and energy reforms. No further mention was made of Mexico in the report, but the fact that our country was catalogued as a “red light,” together with Cuba, Haiti, Colombia and Venezuela, did not go over well in Mexican political circles. Goss made his comments during the first part of a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee that would deal with current and projected threats to U.S. national security. The second part of the hearing was closed.

When asked by former presidential candidate and current Senator John McCain to classify the risk of terrorist infiltration through the border with Mexico, Goss called it “very grave” and mentioned Latin American countries together with Middle Eastern and African nations when talking about potential areas of instability. If Felipe Calderón can be sure of anything, it is that five years ago the CIA already saw Mexico as a country at increasing risk of instability in the framework of the presidential succession.

The Department of Justice’s National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) recently referred to the Mexican drug cartels as the greatest organized crime threat for the United States. Former CIA Director Michael Hayden also said that in terms

of national security [threats], Mexico is second only to Iran. A November 2009 U.S. Department of Defense report stated that the “sudden collapse” of Mexico in the face of drug trafficking pressure and the possibility of a civil war breaking out in Pakistan were the two worst threats for U.S. and world security.

General Hayden (Rtd.) stated that the violence in Mexico, particularly that generated by the drug cartels, is of a nature such that Mexico and Iran will be the main challenges for Barack Obama’s foreign policy. He went on to say that U.S. intelligence services have been undertaking new efforts for greater cooperation with the Mexican government.⁴ For his part, Former National Director of Intelligence Mike McConnell stated that even though Mexico is under threat of violence, the United States is not planning to send ground troops there, but rather to bolster training of Mexican agents to make them more effective.

What is the cost of keeping up the war against the drug traffickers? What levels of violence are we willing to tolerate? How much freedom will be lost when the government initiates new measures? Drug trafficking is unbearable for Latin American countries, particularly our own. The hypotheses the fight against it has been based on until now maintain that there will never be negotiations nor will assumptions different from the existing ones ever be accepted. In short, the government’s intention is to move forward with its strategy: solving the problems of drug-trafficking-related violence using violence. The cost of that move is that now we find ourselves in a blind alley. ■■■

NOTES

¹ See article at <http://www.diariocritico.com/mexico/2010/Febrero/noticias/195327/a-nadie-conviene-que-la-lucha-contra-el-narcotrafico-en-nuestro-pais-se-prolongue-de-manera-indefinida.html>. [Editor’s Note.]

² Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, “Homicidios 1990-2007,” *Nexos* (September 1, 2009), <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=776>. [Editor’s Note.]

³ David Brooks, “Cárteles de México, amenaza para EU, alertan funcionarios,” *La Jornada*, February 27, 2009, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/02/27/index.php?section=politica&article=008n1pol>. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ Pablo Cabañas Díaz, “Triunfos mediáticos, derrota real,” on the Círculo Latinoamericano de Estudios Internacionales web site, http://www.claei.org.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69&catid=11&Itemid=7. [Editor’s Note.]