



# End the Drug War

**All the evidence suggests that the efforts to crush Mexico's violent drug cartels have failed. Why won't the White House listen?**

**BY FULTON T. ARMSTRONG | MARCH 20, 2012**

What more evidence does the U.S. government need to understand that the current approach to fighting the Mexican drug cartels is failing?

The U.S. general who commands military forces in North America [testified](#) before a Senate committee last week that, while the "decapitation strategy" has succeeded in killing some of Mexico's major drug figures, it "has not had an appreciable effect" in thwarting the drug trade. Regional leaders see it even more dimly, as evidenced by their frustrated reactions to Vice President Joseph Biden's [visit](#) to Mexico and Central America this month. That trip suggested the White House just doesn't grasp that the approach launched by George W. Bush's administration in 2007, and continued essentially unchanged by President Barack Obama, has been irrelevant at best and disastrous at worst.

Mexico is far from being a "failed state," but its skyrocketing violence threatens our interests as well as its own. Our economies, our people, and our problems are interdependent. We use the drugs, but Mexicans get shot up. It's not right.

The evidence of policy failure is undisputed: 47,000 Mexicans dead since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006; the continuing flow of hundreds of tons of cocaine and thousands of tons of marijuana into the United States despite post-9/11 border controls and anti-immigration fences; and more than \$20 billion in drug cash and many thousands of U.S. guns streaming south into Mexico each year.

The Bush administration's "Mérida Initiative," a scaled-down version of the efforts to combat drug smuggling in Colombia, has cost U.S. taxpayers \$1.6 billion. Politicians and bureaucrats feel good about Mérida, because it has facilitated unprecedented cooperation between the United States and Mexico and the demise or capture of a dozen drug kingpins. They've been pushing the same approach -- albeit in a more piecemeal fashion and less generously -- on Central America.

But it has barely made a dent in the drug trade it aims to stop. For every drug capo taken down, several lieutenants have surged forward to keep the business going -- but in a manner much harder for U.S. and Mexican intelligence to detect. That was one of the unheeded lessons from

Colombia: taking down the ostentatious, sports car-driving bosses yields a political boost, but the atomization of the drug trade makes it much more challenging to combat.

Both sides deserve blame in choosing this approach. They both pushed for a Colombia-style military approach, and they both failed to advance serious solutions to mounting human rights abuses. As a result, doubts among Mexicans about the government's ability to provide even basic security are deeper. The scary prospect of paramilitary groups taking affairs into their own hands has also emerged: The group that [dumped](#) 35 bodies on a main street in the southeastern city of Veracruz last September called itself the "Mata-Zetas" - the killers of a ferocious gang called the Zetas - and issued self-righteous warnings reminiscent of the paramilitary terrorists in Colombia.

Both the U.S. and Mexican governments have shown glimmers of recognition that the Mérida Initiative, with its heavy military emphasis, has failed. In early 2011, then-U.S. Ambassador Carlos Pascual tried to nudge both countries' bureaucracies and resources toward social, economic, and justice programs that would address the underlying causes of Mexican violence -- less sexy than helicopters, but more strategically important. His "Beyond Mérida" approach was removed from the State Department website after he stepped down as ambassador.

Although the Mexican government's public position remains the same, officials have also grasped that it's time for a change. At a meeting with governors, judges, and mayors 18 months ago, a frustrated Calderón challenged them to help him, saying, "What I ask, simply, is for clear ideas and precise proposals on how to improve this strategy."

Mexico has also quietly begun shifting strategies, from an emphasis on interdicting drugs and dismantling networks to a focus on citizens' safety. "Our obligation is to our people, not to interdicting drugs for the U.S. market," a senior official told me. It's a reprioritization similar to predecessor Mexican administrations.

Both Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have declared "our shared responsibility for the drug violence." But co-responsibility, as they called it, has to mean more than Mérida and intelligence cooperation. We have to get serious about reducing consumption. Forty years after Richard Nixon declared the "War on Drugs," U.S. government drug experts [report](#) that 8.9 percent of Americans aged 12 or older -- an astounding 22.6 million people -- are current users of illegal drugs.

Biden repeated the theme of "shared responsibility" in Central America this month -- in addition to wagging his finger at the region's presidents for launching discussions among themselves on decriminalization options, which they call "market alternatives," as they search for ways to take the edge off the narco-violence.

Regional leaders hit the vice president hard for his failure to offer new solutions. "We demand the United States assume responsibility, said Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla. "Central America is sacrificing the lives, making its enormous sacrifice, and continues to demand that the international community take greater corresponsibility in this struggle."

It's time for Washington to abandon the fiction that the cartels don't operate in the United States. The U.S. government's narcotics-flow maps show the drug trade as fat arrows coursing their way from Colombia through Central America and Mexico -- but they all stop at the U.S. border. The National Drug Intelligence Center has published a list of 235 American cities reporting a Mexican cartel "presence," and that just skims the surface. Ignoring the cartels' vast networks won't make them go away. Co-responsibility also means addressing "southbound" flows -- the U.S. arms and cash that are the *raison d'etre* of the cartels -- to Mexico, Central America and beyond.

Or if we're unwilling to match the courage that the Mexicans have shown -- and if we just want the Central Americans to follow the same failed strategy -- we must launch a serious dialogue here on legalizing, or at least decriminalizing, the drugs. It's not a perfect solution, but it's better than no solution at all.

It's not in the U.S. national interest to be supplying cash and weapons to both sides of the drug war in Mexico. The United States needs a strategy to win the war or to settle it -- not just arm it and watch from the sidelines, as Mexicans die. Mexico will elect a new government this summer. Regardless which party wins, everyone will lose if we don't get a smart policy in place now.

*Fulton T. Armstrong has worked on Mexico, Central America, and counternarcotics at the National Security Council, National Intelligence Council, CIA, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He is a senior fellow at American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies.*

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