MEXICO'S NARCO-INSURGENCY AND U.S. COUNTERDRUG POLICY

Hal Brands

May 2009

*****

This manuscript was funded by the U.S. Army War College External Research Associates Program. Information on this program is available on our website, *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil*, at the Publishing button.

*****

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Ave, Carlisle, PA 17013-5244.

*****

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) publications are available on the SSI homepage for electronic dissemination. Hard copies of this report also may be ordered from our homepage. SSI's homepage address is: *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil*.

*****

The Strategic Studies Institute publishes a monthly e-mail newsletter to update the national security community on the research of our analysts, recent and forthcoming publications, and upcoming conferences sponsored by the Institute. Each newsletter also provides a strategic commentary by one of our research analysts. If you are interested in receiving this newsletter, please subscribe on our homepage at *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/newsletter/*.

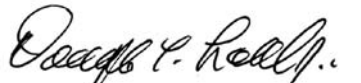
ISBN 1-58487-388-4

FOREWORD

Since 2006, Mexico has rapidly climbed the list of potential trouble spots for U.S. policymakers. Public security in that country has deteriorated dramatically of late. Drug-fueled violence has caused thousands of deaths, taken a severe psychological toll on the citizenry, and, in the estimation of some observers, brought Mexico to the edge of the failed-state precipice.

This rapidly unraveling situation has hardly gone unnoticed in Washington. U.S. officials recently unveiled the so-called "Merida Initiative," a multiyear counterdrug program designed to help the Mexican government turn the tide in its fight against the cartels. As Hal Brands argues in this monograph, however, the Merida Initiative may not represent an optimal solution to the current crisis. It focuses largely on security, enforcement, and interdiction issues, paying less attention to the deeper problems that abet the drug trade and its devastating consequences. These problems include official corruption; U.S. domestic drug consumption; and a host of economic, social, and political questions. If left unaddressed, these ancillary issues will likely frustrate even a counterdrug program as ambitious and well-intended as the Merida Initiative.

To make U.S. counternarcotics strategy fully effective, Brands argues, the United States must forge a more creative and encompassing approach to the drug trade. This strategy should combine interdiction and enforcement initiatives with a wide array of social, economic, political, and U.S. domestic programs, so as to create a broad, interlocking effort that attacks the drug trade from all sides. Forging such a strategy will not be easy, Brands warns, but is nonetheless central to addressing successfully the growing crisis in Mexico and meeting the broader challenges of counterdrug policy.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HAL BRANDS is the author of *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008), and has written widely on U.S. grand strategy, Latin American politics and security, and related issues. He is currently writing a history of the Cold War in Latin America. Mr. Brands is a Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at Yale University.

SUMMARY

On June 30, 2008, President George W. Bush signed into law the Merida Initiative, a 3-year, $1.4 billion counterdrug assistance program for Mexico and Central America. The bulk of this money is destined for Mexico, where it will help fund counternarcotics operations against the powerful cartels that have recently turned much of that country into a war zone. Since 2006, Mexico has suffered thousands of drug-related killings, a dramatic deterioration of public security, and severe psychological and social trauma; the Merida Initiative aims to rectify this situation by giving the Mexican government the tools to take the offensive in its fight against the drug traffickers. The program is likely to be extended in some form when its original mandate expires, and thus presages a long-term U.S. commitment to counternarcotics in Mexico.

The Merida Initiative is representative of the supply-side approach to the narcotics trade that has long characterized U.S. drug control policy. It emphasizes interdiction, enforcement, and security measures, with domestic treatment and prevention programs, source-country economic development projects, and other alternative strategies assuming considerably less importance. This strategy is broadly similar to the approach used in Plan Colombia, the multi-billion dollar U.S. counternarcotics and counterinsurgency commitment to that country, and was recently reaffirmed in the 2008 U.S. National Drug Control Strategy.

Unfortunately, this approach to the drug trade is unlikely to achieve the desired results in Mexico. In focusing largely on security, enforcement, and interdiction, the Merida Initiative pays comparatively

little attention to the deeper structural problems that fuel the drug trade and drug-related violence. These problems, ranging from official corruption in Mexico to large-scale drug consumption in the United States, have so far frustrated Mexican attempts to rein in the cartels, and will likely hinder the effectiveness of the Merida Initiative as well.

For the Merida Initiative to be fully successful, the United States must therefore forge a more holistic, better-integrated approach to the drug trade. This strategy should aim not simply at strengthening the forces of order in Mexico, but also at addressing the root issues that the Merida Initiative comparatively slights. It should partner enforcement and interdiction programs with a wide range of measures: anti-corruption initiatives, social and economic development, institution-building, and efforts to restrict U.S. domestic demand and illicit arms trafficking into Mexico. Implementing such a strategy will not be easy, but it will be central to improving U.S. counternarcotics policy and ensuring that the Merida Initiative is more than a mere palliative for the problems associated with the Mexican drug trade.

MEXICO'S NARCO-INSURGENCY AND U.S. COUNTERDRUG POLICY

INTRODUCTION

In April 2006, individuals linked to one of Mexico's powerful drug cartels left the severed heads of two police officers in front of the municipal building in the southern port city of Acapulco. The two officials were apparently abducted and killed in retaliation for their participation in a shootout with drug traffickers several days earlier. Their bloodied heads were accompanied by a hand-written note reading, "So that you learn some respect," a message meant to make clear that the cartel would brook no interference from the authorities.[1]

Such occurrences have become alarmingly common in Mexico. A remarkably similar episode played out 2 months later in front of the same municipal building, while drug-related murders have become so common in Acapulco that the city is now colloquially known as *Narcopulco*.[2] Such events in Acapulco are merely part of a broader trend sweeping the country, where the past several years, especially the period since 2006, have seen the emergence of a multi-sided war over the drug trade. Heavily armed cartels and their enforcers struggle viciously for control of the drug-trafficking routes running north into the United States, and have recently turned their fire against a government desperate to restrain this bloodshed. For now, the cartels seem to be winning this battle; despite the best efforts of Presidents Vicente Fox (2000-06) and Felipe Calderon (2006-present), the drug trade has continued apace and drug-related violence has reached ever-

higher levels of intensity. As a result, Mexico has been beset by thousands of drug-related deaths over the past 2 years, growth of narcotics-fueled corruption, drastic deterioration of public security, and marked erosion of government authority in various parts of the country. The effects of this violence are not limited to Mexico; cartel killings have already spilled over into the United States, and the potential destabilization of Mexico's economy and political system presents a host of dangers to U.S. interests.

On June 30, 2008, George W. Bush signed into law the U.S. response to this deteriorating situation. The Merida Initiative (colloquially referred to as "Plan Merida" or "Plan Mexico") is a 3-year, $1.4 billion counternarcotics package destined for Mexico and Central America, with Mexico to receive the vast majority of these funds. The central aim of the Merida Initiative is to use U.S. money, training, and equipment to strengthen Mexico's military and law enforcement agencies, thereby giving them the capacity to take and hold the initiative in the fight against the cartels. The initiative likely presages a long-lasting U.S. commitment to counternarcotics programs in Mexico; U.S. and Mexican officials have referred to the program as constituting a "new paradigm" in bilateral security relations.[3]

The Merida Initiative may represent a new paradigm in U.S.-Mexican affairs, but it also symbolizes an old paradigm in U.S. counternarcotics policy. In its emphasis on interdiction and enforcement initiatives, the Merida Initiative is the latest incarnation of a longstanding, supply-side approach to the drug trade. This paradigm focuses mainly on strengthening international interdiction capacities and indigenous security forces in order to increase the pressure on

major foreign traffickers, with domestic treatment and prevention initiatives, source-country economic development programs, and other alternative strategies assuming considerably less importance. This strategy has been manifest most recently in Plan Colombia, the multi-billion dollar U.S. counternarcotics and counterinsurgency commitment to that country, and was reaffirmed in the Bush administration's 2008 National Drug Control Strategy.

This approach is politically popular, as shown by the bipartisan support that the Merida Initiative has thus far received. But is it an effective method of dealing with the inter-American drug trade, and will it work in Mexico? Given the present design and characteristics of the Merida Initiative, the outlook is not auspicious.

This monograph argues that the Merida Initiative—and, by extension, U.S. counternarcotics strategy as a whole—suffers from a basic lack of balance. The Merida Initiative's emphasis on internal security, enforcement, and interdiction is understandable given the current level of chaos and crime in Mexico, and may indeed help redress certain of the operational deficiencies that have hampered Mexican police and military responses to these problems. Yet the initiative pays comparatively little attention to the deeper-rooted factors underlying these devastating phenomena: official corruption, widespread poverty and inequality, weak governance, high demand for illegal narcotics in the United States, and the flow of illicit arms across the U.S. border into Mexico. So far, President Calderon's failure to resolve these issues has hindered his aggressive efforts to rein in the narcotics trade, and in view of the current thrust of the Merida Initiative, there is little reason to think that this program is better suited for such a task. Accordingly, while the initiative will probably produce

increases in arrests, seizures, and other traditional markers of success in the fight against illegal narcotics, it seems unlikely that, over the long term, it will serve as anything more than a palliative for the problems associated with the Mexican drug trade.

The evident shortcomings of the Merida Initiative point to the need for an overhaul of U.S. counterdrug strategy. The United States must seize the opportunity presented by the current crisis in Mexico to forge a more holistic approach to counternarcotics. This strategy should aim not simply at strengthening the forces of order in Mexico, but also at addressing the root issues that the Merida Initiative comparatively slights. This means partnering enforcement and interdiction programs with a wide range of measures, carried out in a sustained and intensive manner and designed to attack the drug trade from all angles. These measures should include anti-corruption initiatives, economic and social development, institution building, and efforts to restrict U.S. domestic demand and lessen illicit arms trafficking into Mexico. Implementing such a strategy will be expensive and politically difficult, no doubt, but it will also be essential to making U.S. counternarcotics policy more effective and ensuring that the Merida Initiative and its successors do not evince the same shortcomings that have long plagued America's "war on drugs."

MEXICO'S NARCO-INSURGENCY

Over the past several years, and especially since 2006, Mexico has experienced an accelerating increase in drug-related violence and a corresponding deterioration of internal security. As part of what might be described as a multi-sided narco-insurgency, well-

financed cartels are doing battle with the government and one another for control of the drug corridors into the United States. Employing private paramilitary forces that use advanced weapons and are renowned for their brutality, the cartels have caused thousands of deaths in the last 2 years, in the process significantly destabilizing internal order in Mexico. Narcotics-driven corruption is rampant, government control of large swaths of the country is tenuous at best, and predictions that Mexico is on the way to becoming a failed state are frequent. "Mexico is under siege," write two experts on gang-related violence, "and the barbarians are dangerously close to breaching the castle walls."[4]

The wellspring of this chaos is the immensely lucrative inter-American narcotics trade. Due to U.S. interdiction successes in the Caribbean, Mexico has now become the single most important way-station for cocaine and heroin produced in the Andes, and is itself a major producer of marijuana and methamphetamines. The permeability of the U.S.-Mexican border allows for easy transit into the United States, and Mexico's share of the drug trade has grown steadily over the past 15 years.[5] More than 90 percent of the cocaine and 70 percent of the methamphetamines and heroin consumed in the United States now either originates or passes through Mexico.[6] The total value of this trade is perhaps $25 billion annually (though estimates vary considerably), much of which is smuggled back into Mexico or laundered through front businesses in the United States.[7] As one writer notes, "Mexican drug cartels generate more revenue than at least 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies, and the U.S. government's highest estimate of cartel revenue tops that of Merck, Deere, and Halliburton."[8]

That this commerce has turned so alarmingly violent of late results from the breakdown of the rules that once governed the industry. For much of the 20th century, Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) oversaw a system of "narcocorruption" that brought a measure of stability to the drug trade.[9] The cartels provided bribes and kept violence to a minimum. In return, the PRI protected the kingpins and resolved conflicts between them, most notably by allocating access to the drug corridors (*plazas*) to the United States.[10] The Mexican state, explains scholar Luis Astorga, served as a "referee of disputes and an apparatus that had the capacity to control, contain, and simultaneously protect these groups."[11] As the PRI gradually lost power during the 1980s and 1990s, this system collapsed. The decline of one-party rule left the Mexican drug trade without a central governing authority, and comparative stability soon gave way to a Hobbesian struggle for control of the *plazas.* According to Astorga, the cartels were now forced "to resolve disputes themselves, and drug traffickers don't do this by having meetings."[12]

The resulting violence has involved at least seven cartels, with the most intense conflict revolving around the actions of four cartels split into two rival alliances. The first group is headed by the Gulf Cartel, which has its center of operations in Nuevo Laredo, and also includes the Tijuana Cartel as well as several smaller organizations. Opposing this loose alliance is the Federation, a shifting coalition led by the Sinaloa Cartel. Based primarily in the states of Baja (Lower California), Sinaloa, Durango, Sonora, and Chihuahua, the Sinaloa Cartel is led by the notorious Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and has forged pacts with several former rivals, the most important of which is the Juarez

Cartel.[13] Since the late 1990s, these competing factions have done battle across Mexico, contesting each other's control of crucial northern border cities like Nuevo Laredo, Juarez, and Tijuana, strategic southern ports like Acapulco, and interior transit points between. The Federation has launched what the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) calls a "violent eradication campaign against its rivals," seeking to dislodge them from strongholds like Nuevo Laredo and Tijuana; the Gulf and Tijuana cartels have responded with fierce attacks throughout Federation territory.[14]

Because these alliances tend to be tenuous and impermanent, bloodshed occurs not simply between them, but within them as well. Smaller cartels shift allegiances frequently, band-wagoning with or balancing against the dominant coalition. In early 2008, for instance, the Milenio Cartel defected from the Federation to ally with the Gulf Cartel, touching off a new round of bloodshed. (These shifts occur so regularly that even Mexican government agencies have difficulty determining who is allied with whom at a given point.) Power struggles within a single cartel are also common, as the arrest or assassination of a cartel leader often fosters violent leadership disputes. As a result, drug-related violence in Mexico occurs on several different planes, resulting in a multi-dimensional conflict.[15]

Paramilitary Organizations.

This bloodshed has been all the more intense due to the rise of heavily armed, well-trained paramilitary forces as the chief combatants in the struggle for control of the drug trade. To outmaneuver and outgun their rivals (and also the authorities), cartel leaders have

taken to recruiting former military and police officials, common criminals, and security guards to serve as foot soldiers in their own private armies. The Sinaloa Cartel formed an organization known as *Los Pelones* out of military deserters and turncoat police officers; Guzman now employs a similar group, the *Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo* (FEDA), composed of former security officials and gang members from Mexico and the United States.

The gold standard for the paramilitaries remains *Los Zetas,* an organization linked to the Gulf Cartel. The Zetas initially consisted of 31 deserters from the Mexican army's Airborne Special Forces Groups—elite counternarcotics units—that switched sides in 1997. The organization has since grown considerably, now consisting of 100-200 men and women, and is distinguished by its advanced training and proficiency in violence. As elite commandos, the original Zetas were experts in "rapid deployment, aerial assaults, marksmanship, ambushes, intelligence collection, counter-surveillance techniques, prisoner rescues, sophisticated communications, and the art of intimidation," skills they have put to good use in their new profession.[16] While many later recruits have come from more pedestrian backgrounds, the Zetas have compensated by establishing training camps for these new members and incorporating roughly 30 *Kaibiles,* or former counterinsurgency specialists from the Guatemalan army, into the ranks.[17]

The Zetas resemble less a street gang than an efficient, highly evolved criminal organization. The group is considered by U.S. officials to be "the most technologically advanced, sophisticated, and violent" private army in Mexico.[18] They have developed an efficient organizational apparatus that involves

individuals as diverse as electronic surveillance experts and information-gathering prostitutes.[19] The Congressional Research Service reports that the Zetas are now "an increasingly sophisticated, three-tiered organization, with leaders and middlemen who coordinate contracts with petty criminals to carry out street work."[20]

Zeta attacks are often marked by their complex, elaborate plans and execution. The Zetas have used the cell-phone signatures of their opponents to coordinate assassinations and kidnappings, and there are reports that they have penetrated the radio frequencies used by Mexican law enforcement.[21] The group has been known to use the sort of swarming tactics favored by the powerful gangs that control the Brazilian *favelas*, and in other cases has put its military experience to use in more subtle ways.[22] In 2007, Zetas disguised as soldiers infiltrated two police stations under the guise of a routine weapons inspection and murdered seven government officials.[23]

In carrying out these attacks, the Zetas and their competitors employ an astounding amount of firepower. The AK-47, long the stock tool of the Mexican drug trade, is now accompanied by an array of heavy weapons, including MP-5s, AR-15s, P90 submachine guns, grenade launchers, helicopters, improvised explosive devices, and 50-caliber machine guns.[24] "You're looking at the same firepower here on the border that our soldiers are facing in Iraq and Afghanistan," says Thomas Mangan of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF).[25] "It is incredible, facing these weapons," agrees Genaro Garcia Luna, Mexico's Secretary of Public Security. "It is truly astonishing, in terms of quantity, in terms of caliber."[26]

Another calling card of these groups is their brutality. Aiming to terrify their opponents and cow the population, organizations like FEDA and the Zetas use a variety of savage tactics. The Zetas are known to strangle, decapitate, and immolate their victims, often after torturing them for hours. Another group linked to the Gulf Cartel recently advertised its expertise in such practices by lobbing five severed heads onto the floor of a crowded nightclub in Uruapan. Decapitated heads are often found with notes warning of the consequences of opposing the cartels. "See. Hear. Shut up. If you want to stay alive," read one.[27]

Since 2006, these groups have increasingly turned their fire on the authorities. The cartels have reacted viciously to the Calderon government's anti-drug campaign, responding to arrests and drug seizures by launching a sustained, bloody war against those that seek to disrupt their activities. Ambushes of police convoys and well-coordinated attacks against isolated government outposts in the northern part of the country have become frequent.[28] The cartels regularly murder the officials in charge of designing and prosecuting government counternarcotics operations, including police chiefs in Nuevo Laredo and elsewhere and the head of Mexico's federal police.[29] The anti-government violence has become so intense in recent months as to cause speculation that the two warring cartel alliances may have agreed to a truce so as to focus on fighting the government. Argues one observer, "We're seeing a transition from the gangsterism of traditional hitmen to paramilitary terrorism with guerrilla tactics."[30]

Cartel attacks are thus not meant solely to batter the police and the military, but also to sow fear and demonstrate that the cartels—not the government—are dominant in Mexico. Many drug-related killings are

spectacularly violent, aimed at achieving the maximum psychological impact. In one instance, the Zetas stuffed four Nuevo Laredo police officers inside barrels of diesel fuel and burned them to death.[31] Decapitations such as those occurring in Acapulco serve the same purpose.[32] Cartel enforcers have begun to publish lists of officials to be targeted for assassination, post execution videos on YouTube, and coerce newspapers into providing graphic coverage of their deeds.[33] "They are openly defying the Mexican state," says one analyst. "They are showing that they can kill anybody at any time."[34]

Third-Generation Gangs and the Extent of the Threat.

All told, the effects of this violence have been devastating. There were more than 5,000 drug-related murders in Mexico between January 2007 and October 2008, with 3,800 of these deaths occurring in the first 10 months of 2008 alone.[35] This bloodshed has become more wanton as it becomes more common; in September 2008, unknown assailants threw grenades into a crowd in Morelia during an Independence Day celebration. Aside from inflicting a mounting toll in lives, the violence has occasioned something approaching mass psychological trauma. A palpable sense of fear has spread across much of the population. Says one woman, "We are prisoners in our own homes."[36] In some regions—particularly in areas of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa—the cartels have become so powerful as to render government authority nominal or nonexistent. One DEA official describes the prevailing situation in northern Mexico as "somewhere between Al Capone's Chicago and an outright war."[37]

This breakdown of government authority in certain areas touches on one of the most troubling long-term

implications of the narcotics-fueled insurgency in Mexico: the possibility that it may lead to what one expert calls the "decomposition of the State."[38] This phenomenon, in which government power gives way amid the violence and terror sown by sophisticated criminal organizations, has become increasingly common in Latin America over the past 2 decades. Several countries have witnessed the rise of what are known as "third-generation gangs." Larger, more complex, and more powerful than street gangs, third-generation gangs use violence and intimidation to weaken government institutions and corrode the authority of the state.[39] Such groups dominate the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and the *barrios* of Central America, which now constitute "no-go" zones for law enforcement and government officials. Third-generation gangs have emerged as the chief threat to internal stability and security in Latin America.[40] Their activities have given Latin America the highest homicide rates in the world, dampened economic activity, and dramatically lowered popular confidence in government.[41]

The Mexican cartels and their paramilitary organizations fit firmly within this trend. Drug-related violence in Mexico has contributed markedly to what Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution calls "the hollowing out of the state."[42] Through their violence, the cartels have laid bare the limits and weaknesses of the Mexican authorities, leading to a dramatic souring of popular views on the competence and credibility of the central government. If current trends continue, many observers fear, the government may lose its status as the ultimate arbiter of internal order, thereby crippling the Mexican state. "The danger in Mexico," argues Tony Payan of the University

of Texas at El Paso, "is that the drug organizations become so powerful they can challenge the federal government."[43]

The threat from the cartels does not end at the border. The deteriorating situation in Mexico could easily trigger a wave of illegal immigration to the United States; there were more than five times as many such migrants in 2007 as there were in 2006.[44] Rising political instability could also imperil the $364 billion in annual commerce that crosses the U.S.-Mexican border and more than $84 billion in U.S. direct investment.[45] Finally, Mexico's turmoil has already begun to spill over into Texas, Arizona, and other southwestern states. Cartel hit squads have carried out murders in Phoenix and other U.S. cities,[46] and an individual linked to the Zetas is currently wanted in the killing of a Dallas police officer.[47] Traffickers ran down and killed a U.S. border patrol agent during a cross-border trafficking operation in January 2008,[48] and enforcer groups like the Zetas are suspected of mounting armed incursions across the frontier to protect drug shipments.[49] As former State Department official Ray Walser observes, "Not since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 has violence in Mexico presented such a worrisome challenge to U.S. security."[50]

The Government Response: Why So Ineffective?

The Mexican government has hardly been inactive in seeking to meet the cartels' challenge. In 2005, Vicente Fox, Mexico's first post-PRI president, promised to wage "the mother of all battles" on the *narcotraficantes*.[51] He purged corrupt police commanders (and in some cases, entire police forces), targeted high-level traffickers, and deployed federal troops to the northern

part of the country. Felipe Calderon, who took office in late 2006, has been even more aggressive in his response. "There will be no truce and no quarter to the enemies of Mexico," he says, sometimes donning an army uniform to underline his resolve.[52] Calderon has sent 12,000 federal police officials and 20,000 soldiers to 12 states in a series of "lightning strikes" aimed at containing drug-related violence.[53]

These efforts have not been without effect. Under Calderon, the government has detained more than 14,000 suspects (including a number of high-profile targets) and seized large quantities of heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines. Massive police and troop deployments have temporarily tamped down violence in certain areas, and have somewhat weakened the cartels. *Los Pelones* have become less effective, and the Zetas have seen several of their leaders arrested or killed.[54]

Unfortunately, the positive effects of the government offensive have been transitory at best. The recent upsurge in violence indicates that these programs have not brought the cartels to heel. While increased seizures and interdictions have caused increases of up to 20 percent in the street price of cocaine and heroin, these measures seem to have made little more than a dent in the overall volume and value of the drug trade. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Calderon's offensive "does not appear to have significantly reduced drug trafficking in Mexico."[55]

Why this disappointing outcome? One reason is that the Mexican government simply does not possess the enforcement capabilities necessary to confront the cartels. Coordination between Mexico's two federal and more than 1,600 local and state police

forces is weak and inconsistent, complicating efforts to mount large-scale operations. The Mexican police and military lack the manpower to remain in all drug hot-spots indefinitely, and in many cases, the cartels simply wait for the troops to depart before resuming operations. (One DEA agent calls this the "whack-a-mole" effect.)[56] When the cartels do stand and fight, the results are often little better, as groups like the Zetas and FEDA are frequently better-armed and better-trained than the authorities. "They are professionals," comments one analyst of the paramilitaries. "The authorities don't have the resources to face up to a phenomenon like this."[57] In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a majority of Mexicans now feel that the government is losing its war on drugs.[58]

But Calderon's difficulties are not just a matter of firepower and numbers. An ability to blunt the anti-drug offensive is also intimately tied to several deeper issues, ranging from widespread poverty, to the pervasive deficiencies of Mexican governance, to the persistent U.S. role in abetting the drug trade and the violence that attends it.

Of these issues, official corruption looms as perhaps the most important. Corruption has long been endemic to Mexico, and among aspiring elites, a government post is still often seen more as a means of personal enrichment than as a vehicle for disinterested public service. This mindset is well-captured in the remarks of a PRI politician who, upon being elected to serve as a federal deputy, told the residents of his town—his nominal political base—to "take a good look at my face because you are never going to see it again in this fly-specked, chicken-shit little village."[59]

The lucrative and brutal nature of the drug trade has compounded this perennial problem. Honest

public servants—whether local cops or prominent politicians—who oppose the drug traffickers risk a violent, painful death. "Why would anyone want to be a cop," asks one Mexican commentator, "when no one can guarantee their safety, less so their life?"[60] Those who collaborate with the cartels, on the other hand, are in line for massive payoffs—up to $450,000 per month for high-ranking officials, according to recent reports.[61]

The cartels have used this time-tested formula of *plata o plomo* ("money or lead") to co-opt large segments of the Mexican government. Local police officers have reportedly kidnapped the Zetas' competitors and delivered them to that paramilitary organization to be tortured and killed.[62] More commonly, the local police provide the cartels with early warning of impending government operations. "Everyone in the world knows we're coming," one federal police official complains.[63]

The scope of the corruption is difficult to overstate. In several instances, local police forces have become so thoroughly infested with informers that the federal government has been forced to disband them entirely. This same problem applies to the federal police; within the Federal Investigative Agency (AFI), an organization that was itself created to replace Mexico's hopelessly corrupt Federal Judicial Police, 2,500 of 7,000 agents were being investigated for crimes as of late 2005.[64] Since July 2008, Mexican intelligence agencies have warned that the cartels have secured the cooperation of members of the national legislature, officials at the highest levels of the attorney general's office, and perhaps even the U.S. embassy.[65] The traffickers, warns Guillermo Valdes, Mexico's intelligence chief, are "trying to take over the power of the state."[66] Given this level of corruption, it is not difficult to understand

why Calderon's programs have not produced the desired results.

The armed forces are generally thought to be far more honest and trustworthy than the police, which is one reason why Calderon has relied so heavily on the military since taking office. Even this institution, however, is highly vulnerable to the predations of the cartels. Low pay and difficult working conditions led to an astounding 100,000 desertions between 2000 and 2006, and nearly 50,000 more since Calderon's ascension to the Presidency. The Zetas and other paramilitary organizations tempt soldiers to switch sides by offering salaries of up to $3,000 per week (in comparison to the $1,100 per month earned by most members of the armed forces).[67] Banners hung by the Zetas promise "a good salary, food, and medical care for your families," as well as "loans and life insurance."[68] The undeniable allure of these offers has led many Mexican officials to fear that militarizing the drug conflict will simply lead to greater corruption within the armed forces, weakening the one relatively reliable pillar of public order in the country.[69]

Calderon's reliance on the military has proved problematic in other respects as well. The Mexican army has a sorry history of human rights abuses, symbolized by the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. The armed forces' record has improved in recent decades, but violations have increased since the military became the essential implement of Calderon's strategy. According to one estimate, there have been more than 600 human rights violations since late 2006.[70] These abuses allegedly include extrajudicial executions, illegal detentions, and torture. Soldiers are accused of stealing from residents during drug-related searches, and of sexually assaulting 14 women in the state of

Coahuila in 2006.[71] These practices, troubling in their own right, also come at a cost in terms of weakening the effectiveness of government counternarcotics programs. Human rights abuses destroy trust between the armed forces and the public, making it less likely that citizens will cooperate in the fight against the drug traffickers. Such a backlash has already occurred in several locations. Only 18 percent of residents in Ciudad Juarez approve of the army's presence in that city, and the border town of Ojinaga recently witnessed public protests against military brutality.[72] One Nuevo Laredo resident concisely expresses the hostility bred by military and police excesses: "I trust the Zetas more than the thieving police and soldiers."[73]

The structural and institutional weaknesses dramatized by police and military malfeasance reach far beyond these organizations, extending into numerous realms of Mexican governance. The judiciary is particularly ill-suited to participate in a vigorous attack on drug-related crime. Mexico's legal system has no specific anti-gang laws that could be used to target the cartels, and the system as a whole is no less corrupt than the law enforcement community.[74] Most Mexican courts operate according to arcane, colonial-era rules, and the system is so weak that only 1-2 percent of all crimes are punished.[75] This remarkably low rate of conviction serves as a virtual guarantee that most criminals will escape punishment, thus constituting an immense deterrent to citizen cooperation with ongoing investigations.

The list of institutional inadequacies goes on. The Mexican financial system, for instance, is largely opaque to government oversight, and the fact that the government cannot compel the banks to report large deposits makes investigating money laundering and

corruption all the more difficult.[76] Across these and other examples, one thus encounters the same theme: In their current state, Mexico's political and government institutions are simply not strong enough to support a vigorous counterdrug strategy.

An equally entrenched impediment to such a program is the poverty that afflicts much of Mexican society. Despite relatively strong macroeconomic growth over the past 15 years, roughly 40 percent of Mexico's population lives in poverty, with 18 percent living in extreme poverty. Moreover, because Mexico's macroeconomic successes occurred under a model that emphasized cutting social programs, deregulating wages, and allowing prices to rise freely, the government has been slow to deploy meaningful initiatives to ameliorate the adverse effects of this deprivation on the standard of living.[77]

The cartels thrive on the resentment that often results. While the *narcotraficantes* use violence to silence those who oppose them, they also use the proceeds from the drug trade to cultivate a loyal following among the poor and disaffected. The Gulf Cartel donates food, bicycles, clothing, and toys to Nuevo Laredo residents, and drug kingpins throw festivals for the residents of their strongholds.[78] In many cases, these overtures find a receptive audience. Guzman, the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, is the subject of admiring *narcorridos,* or folk songs, that tout his generosity and his ability to elude the authorities.[79] In the same vein, the combination of desperate poverty and cartel largesse provides a steady stream of recruits for these organizations. Young boys proclaim, "I want to be a Zeta," and recipients of the group's benevolence have said, "We are all Zetas."[80] As Adolfo Franco of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) notes, "The poverty, lack

of opportunity, and feelings of hopelessness that characterize many lives in Latin America are often no match for the cash flow, livelihood, and social cohesion offered by many gangs."[81]

Finally, efforts to rein in the drug trade have foundered on two hugely important U.S. contributions to this industry: demand and guns. With respect to demand, American buyers continually provide a lucrative outlet for drugs smuggled through Mexico, and the billions of dollars in annual profits shipped back across the border provide the grease that lubricates the narcotics trade. "In significant measure," one U.S. official acknowledges, the perpetuation of drug-related problems in Mexico "grows out of violent people taking advantage of the continuing strong demand in the United States."[82]

Similarly, the United States acts as an inexhaustible arsenal for the cartels. While Mexico has very strict gun laws, the United States does not, and the vast majority of weaponry (90-95 percent) used by the traffickers originates north of the border. Cartel operatives and middlemen acquire these arms through gun shows, pawn shops, and dealers in the United States, or by stealing them from U.S. military facilities. The weapons are then taken across the border in ones and twos, forming what Mexican officials call "the iron river."[83] Though, as one ATF official notes, there is "no real way to put a metric" on the number of guns taken into Mexico, some observers estimate as high as several hundred per day, and there may be up to 40 million illicit weapons in Mexico.[84] Neither Mexico nor the United States has yet fashioned a solution to this problem; this failure ensures that U.S. guns continue to play an integral role in Mexican violence.

In sum, the apparent intractability of the drug trade and drug-related violence in Mexico does not testify

simply to the paramilitary strengths of the cartels and the operational deficiencies of the police and military. It is also inextricably linked to the broader context of Mexican politics and society, that is, the glaring institutional failures of Mexican governance and the U.S. role in perpetuating the narcotics industry. In short, Mexico's problems are exceedingly complex and deep-seated; any real solution to these problems will have to be no less encompassing.

THE MERIDA INITIATIVE: CHARACTERISTICS, AIMS, AND PROSPECTS

The Merida Initiative, signed into law by President George W. Bush on June 30, 2008, represents the U.S response to this situation. Named for the Mexican city in which it was agreed upon at an October 2007 summit between Presidents Bush and Calderon, the initiative is a 3-year, $1.4 billion counternarcotics package destined for Mexico and Central America, with the former country set to receive the vast majority of these funds ($400 million of the $465 million to be disbursed in the first year, and similar proportions thereafter). U.S. counternarcotics aid to Mexico had previously hovered around $55-60 million annually in the 7 years since 2000; the Merida Initiative thus represents a roughly sevenfold expansion of this assistance. For its part, the Calderon government has committed $7 billion in counternarcotics funding over the next 3 years.[85] Officials on both sides of the border have said that they envision the Merida Initiative as the first step in a long-term partnership between Washington and Mexico City.[86]

The essential thrust of the Merida Initiative is to better enable Mexican authorities to contain and

roll back the violence that has roiled that country of late. It is designed to complement Calderon's recent offensive, which U.S. officials have characterized in highly laudatory terms. Calderon "has shown great leadership and great strength of character," Bush said in 2007, "which gives me good confidence that the plan we'll develop will be effective."[87] U.S. assistance will help "increase the operational capabilities of Mexican agencies and institutions," explains a State Department official, thereby allowing them "to break the power and impunity of drug and criminal organizations that threaten the health and public safety of their citizens and the stability and security of the region."[88]

The funding scheme for the Merida Initiative reflects this hope. Over the next 3 years, the United States will provide equipment and training to Mexican law enforcement (which will receive 59 percent of these resources) and the armed forces (41 percent). This aid is to be disbursed in three clusters. The first is Counternarcotics, Counterterrorism, and Border Security; the second, Public Security and Law Enforcement; the third, Institution Building and the Rule of Law.[89]

By far the largest chunk of funding (about $327 million of the $400 million allotted for the first year, or nearly 82 percent) is devoted to the first and second clusters, which are very similar in their enforcement-first approach to the drug problem. Roughly 60 percent of this money (slightly more than $200 million) will pay for eight transport helicopters, designed to facilitate the rapid deployment of Mexican troops, and two surveillance aircraft to give the government greater awareness of cartel activities. The remainder of these funds will be used to provide law enforcement agencies with tools to aid detection and interdiction: ion scanners, Gamma- and X-ray inspection equipment,

and training for the drug-sniffing dogs of Mexican police and customs; the modernization of computer and information systems used by several agencies; and secure communications equipment to allow more efficient exchange of information and intelligence. These programs will substantially increase the anti-drug capabilities of the Mexican authorities, U.S. officials believe, and when combined with Calderon's recent decision to increase military spending and nearly double the size of the federal police, should tilt the balance in favor of the government.

The remainder of first-year funding (about $73.5 million, or around 18 percent) will go to the third cluster, Institution Building and the Rule of Law. This money will be directed toward addressing certain of the institutional failures that have so far obstructed more effective government action. It will fund prison and judicial reform, training in how to handle evidence, assistance in vetting new police recruits and commanders, and a limited expansion of Mexican drug treatment and prevention programs. Examples of aid to be provided under this cluster include polygraph technology that can be used to screen police officials and assistance in improving witness protection capabilities.[90]

As the allocation of more than 81 percent of first-year funds to clusters one and two indicates, the central priorities of the Merida Initiative are interdiction and enforcement, with institution-building, anti-corruption, social projects, and economic programs receiving considerably less (if any) emphasis. Various observers in the United States and Mexico have criticized this apparent imbalance, but on the whole there is strong official support for such an approach.[91] President Calderon has called for the Merida Initiative to be

extended throughout Latin America. Within the U.S. Government, backing for the program is bipartisan.[92] Prominent Democrats such as Bill Richardson, Christopher Dodd, and Patrick Leahy support the measure, and executive branch officials argue that the program's stress on interdiction and enforcement is essential to a successful showdown with the cartels.[93] Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said: "I see no other way than to be very tough on organized crime, to be capable of dealing with these very violent people who are trying to terrorize the population, who are trying to carry out their criminal activities. I see no other way."[94] Scott Burns, the second-ranking U.S. anti-drug official, offered a similar assessment, predicting that the Merida Initiative would "build the capacity of our friends to permanently shut the door on the largest inflow of illegal drugs into the United States."[95]

Evaluating the Supply-Side Paradigm.

The Merida Initiative was hardly fashioned from whole cloth. Aside from building on President Calderon's anti-drug offensive, it also represents the latest incarnation of the dominant paradigm in U.S. counternarcotics policy. Over the past several decades and especially since the 1980s, counterdrug initiatives have steadily taken on greater importance in U.S. diplomacy. With hundreds of tons of cocaine, heroin, and other drugs entering the United States annually, drug-related upheaval afflicting U.S. allies in Latin America, and proceeds from this illicit trade benefiting terrorist organizations such as al-Qai'da and the Taliban, Washington has taken a variety of steps to impede international drug smuggling. Coca and poppy eradication programs in the Andes and

Afghanistan, an Air Bridge Denial initiative meant to disrupt narcotics shipments from South America, projects aimed at eroding the financial bases of the drug trade, and numerous other initiatives all fit within this context. The amount of money devoted to such endeavors has increased greatly over the past several years, rising from roughly $3 billion in FY 2002 to $5.4 billion for FY 2009.[96]

The dominant feature of U.S. counternarcotics policy is, and long has been, a supply-side approach. This paradigm, reaffirmed in the provisions of the Merida Initiative, was also recently restated in the Bush administration's 2008 National Drug Control Strategy. This document assigns the greatest importance to disrupting the operations of major foreign cartels rather than restricting domestic demand, promoting social and economic development in source countries, or pursuing alternative strategies for combating the drug trade. The five goals of the strategy are: "(1) reduce the flow of drugs into the United States; (2) disrupt and dismantle major drug trafficking organizations; (3) focus on the nexus between the drug trade and other potential transnational threats to the United States, including terrorism; (4) deny drug traffickers, narcoterrorists, and their criminal associates their illicit profits and money laundering activities; and (5) assist foreign countries threatened by illegal drugs in strengthening their governance and law enforcement institutions." Funding for counterdrug programs reflects these priorities, as the Bush administration increased the proportion of the narcotics control budget devoted to interdiction and capacity-building for foreign law enforcement and military agencies, reduced the percentage of funds spent on domestic demand restriction, and resisted congressional efforts

to place greater stress on promoting alternative development programs in source countries.[97]

How effective is this paradigm? There is no shortage of debate. U.S. officials aver that American counternarcotics programs have helped combat drug-related violence in South America and elsewhere, and argue that these initiatives reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. Critics dispute these claims, contending that the current counterdrug model is politically popular but fundamentally misguided. One way of assessing these arguments, and of evaluating the efficacy of the current paradigm, is to examine the emblematic example of that strategy: Plan Colombia.

Case Study: Plan Colombia.

Between 2000 and the announcement of the Merida Initiative in late 2007, Plan Colombia dominated U.S. counterdrug policy. During this period, the Clinton and Bush administrations poured more than $7 billion in foreign and military aid into Colombia in hopes of quelling a drug-fueled insurgency and staunching the flow of cocaine and heroin to the United States. U.S. contractors, civilian officials, and uniformed military were (and continue to be) deeply involved in counterinsurgency and counternarcotics missions in Colombia, leading observers to refer to Plan Colombia as America's "number three war."[98]

Plan Colombia originated in response to a dangerous synergy between criminal activity and political violence. By the late 1990s, the Colombian drug trade had become a major national security issue for both Colombia and the United States. Colombian exports accounted for nine-tenths of the cocaine

entering the United States, and contributed heavily to the perhaps 20,000 drug-related deaths that occurred in the United States per year.[99] Within Colombia, the drug trade was fueling massive corruption that reached as high as the office of the president, driving intense internal violence (around 30,000 murders per year, a sixfold increase from 2 decades prior), and feeding the ambitions of a powerful Marxist insurgency.[100] The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) used the approximately $380 million it garnered from the drug trade each year to acquire advanced weapons and entice new recruits. By 2000, the FARC boasted around 20,000 combatants, was able to overwhelm and annihilate isolated army garrisons, had Bogota nearly cut off from the rest of the country, and controlled roughly 40 percent of Colombian territory.[101] The group also staged hundreds of attacks on U.S. interests in Colombia; according to one count, the FARC was responsible for 55 percent of terrorist attacks against American targets in 2001.[102]

Plan Colombia represented a joint U.S.-Colombian response to these interlocking threats. U.S. aid would allow a besieged government to take strong action against the FARC and hundreds of Colombian cartels, as the thinking went, thereby restricting drug exports and restoring internal order. "The ultimate test of success," said DEA administrator Donnie Marshall, "will come when we bring to justice the drug lords who control their vast empires of crime which bring misery to so many nations."[103] Of the roughly $7 billion in aid granted under the initiative, nearly 80 percent went to facilitating interdiction and strengthening Colombia's military and National Police, with 10-20 percent devoted to economic and social programs meant to provide alternative sources of income for

poor farmers and thus undercut the economic basis of the drug trade.[104]

Plan Colombia has been touted by the Bush administration as a striking success, and damned by its critics as an utter failure. In reality, its results were ambiguous, demonstrating both the strengths and weaknesses of the current counternarcotics paradigm.

With respect to internal security and interdiction, Plan Colombia has produced clear-cut gains. Since 2000, U.S. assistance has had pronounced benefits in the fight against the FARC. The training of three elite counternarcotics battalions (totaling around 3000 soldiers) and 30 Ranger-style strike teams has roughly doubled the number of elite troops that the Colombian army can put into the field, while the provision of more than 70 *Blackhawk* and *Huey II* helicopters has greatly increased the mobility and combat effectiveness of these forces. U.S. intelligence support has been similarly beneficial, allowing the Colombian military to target high-level FARC commanders and aiding in the bold rescue of 15 high-profile hostages in July 2008.[105]

Combined with the assertive counterinsurgency program of President Alvaro Uribe, this aid has helped deal the FARC a series of staggering blows. The insurgent leadership has been decimated by targeted strikes and the deaths of top commanders. Desertions, captures, and overall guerrilla casualties have risen dramatically, severely reducing the guerrillas' numerical strength.[106] Colombian forces have largely cleared the FARC from the departments surrounding Bogota and substantially weakened the guerrillas even in traditional redoubts like Putumayo, Caqueta, and the slums of Medellin.[107] The FARC retains a hard core of some 8,000-10,000 fighters and receives arms and funding from Venezuela, but its overall military

effectiveness has declined sharply, and the survival of democratic government in Colombia is no longer in imminent peril.[108]

The interdiction component of Plan Colombia has (numerically, at least) produced similarly strong advances. The delivery of ground radar systems, forward-looking infrared radar (FLIR) for Colombian intelligence aircraft, patrol boats for riverine interdiction, and other equipment and training have greatly increased Colombian interdiction capabilities.[109] The number of cocaine laboratories destroyed rose from 241 in 1999 to nearly 2,200 in 2006, dozens of drug-carrying aircraft have been captured or destroyed, and arrests and extraditions are up.[110] Additionally, as part of a program that is complementary to but not explicitly a part of Plan Colombia, cooperation among U.S., Colombian, and international assets has allowed the Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) of U.S. Southern Command to make major strides in disrupting narcotics shipments through the Caribbean. The number of seizures in the transit zone (the area between Colombia and the United States) has increased from 90 to 260 metric tons per year, with the proportion of shipments seized rising as well.[111]

These are impressive statistics, but in many ways they conceal the less successful reality of Plan Colombia. With respect to an overarching goal of the program—significantly reducing the quantities of cocaine and heroin delivered into the United States—the picture is one of little progress. Between 2000 and 2004, street prices for cocaine actually decreased, indicating a steady if not expanding supply. Prices have increased somewhat since 2005, but on the whole supply is still more than adequate to meet the continuing domestic demand for the drug. The Justice Department's

National Drug Intelligence Center acknowledges that "there have been no sustained cocaine shortages or indications of stretched supplies in domestic markets," and shipments to the United States still overwhelmingly originate in Colombia.[112]

The reason for this unsatisfying outcome is that Plan Colombia—and the counternarcotics paradigm it represents—has suffered from a fundamental lack of balance. The United States has failed to join the security and interdiction components of Plan Colombia with sufficiently bold efforts to reduce U.S. domestic demand or alter the economic calculus that drives many Colombians to participate in the drug trade. Accordingly, seized shipments are quickly replaced, coca still dominates the rural economy, and the Colombian-American drug trade continues to flourish.

Within the United States, the chief marker of this imbalance is that Plan Colombia was not accompanied by a parallel push to restrict domestic cocaine and heroin consumption. In fact, the trend has been just the opposite, with the percentage of the U.S. drug control budget devoted to treatment and prevention declining from 46 percent to 35 percent between FY 2002 and FY 2007.[113] U.S. domestic demand for cocaine and other drugs remains strong, and it appears that this continuing demand has led Colombian traffickers to compensate for the much-touted rise in seizures over the past several years by simply increasing the quantity of narcotics shipped.[114]

Within Colombia, the chief weakness of U.S. policy has been its failure to reduce the economic incentives that push poor farmers to provide a steady supply of coca to the groups that refine and ship it. As of 2006, Colombian farmers could earn 4-12 times

more by cultivating coca than by participating in the licit economy, roughly the same ratio as before Plan Colombia.[115] "There is nothing as economically profitable as coca," concedes one U.S. official.[116]

Plan Colombia did include programs meant to redress this problem. USAID and its Colombian counterparts ran financial and technical assistance programs that offered cows, cash, and tools to farmers who signed pledges to abandon coca cultivation. These agencies also sponsored the construction of food-processing plants, concrete factories, and other industrial facilities designed to provide employment alternatives and promote economic growth in the countryside.[117]

Given the pronounced slant of Plan Colombia funding toward military and police programs, however, these projects never received the necessary emphasis. From 2000 to 2005, for instance, U.S. agencies spent $1.2 billion on aerial spraying programs that eradicated hundreds of thousands of acres of coca, but only $213 million on the development programs meant to lock in these gains by giving the affected farmers another source of income.[118] As a result, economic development projects have foundered. In 2006, USAID withdrew from Caqueta in part because of an inability to sustain alternative development programs, and coca cultivation in the area has surged since.[119] Guaviare, the second-most sprayed region in Colombia, received just $500,000 in development assistance between 2000 and 2004, resulting in similar problems.[120] In Putumayo, aerial spraying was devoted to roughly 400,000 acres of farmland, but, reports the Center for International Policy's Adam Isaacson, nonmilitary aid was "slower to arrive, haphazardly planned, and . . . largely failed to improve lives and livelihoods." Farmers regularly

complain of having signed coca eradication pacts but never receiving the cows, tools, or money promised in return. Accordingly, coca eradication programs brought only temporary improvement, with cultivation having actually risen since 2003.[121] United Nations reports indicate that at least 70 percent of the land sprayed for eradication purposes was later reconverted to coca, and the overall acreage under cultivation actually increased by 36 percent between 2000 and 2004.[122] With the economic incentives for cultivation having stagnated, the Colombian drug trade has shown no sign of abating.

Indeed, the void left by the weakening of the FARC and certain of the cartels has simply been filled by new actors. During the late 1990s, Colombian commanders forged an alliance of convenience with an often-brutal paramilitary group known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) based on a common hostility to the FARC.[123] The AUC played no small role in the defeats subsequently inflicted on the FARC, but given the persistent profitability of the drug trade, the organization exploited these victories by insinuating itself into the narcotics industry. According to one estimate, former members of the AUC (which was technically demobilized in 2003, though many observers doubt the authenticity of the demobilization) are now responsible for 40 percent of cocaine production in Colombia.[124] The drug trade has not been defeated, but simply made subject to new masters.

Overall, Plan Colombia thus rates as only a very qualified success. Its security accomplishments are undeniable, as are the upticks in seizures, arrests, and extraditions. But U.S. policy during this period has consistently failed to integrate these programs into a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy that

fully exploits alternative development programs and domestic prevention and treatment initiatives. While Plan Colombia has therefore helped alleviate certain adverse effects of the drug trade within Colombia, it has done little to address the deeper factors that drive that commerce. If Plan Colombia can fairly be said to represent the current U.S. counternarcotics paradigm, then that paradigm remains sadly incomplete.

The Merida Initiative: Prospects for Success.

Will the Merida Initiative be more successful than Plan Colombia, or will it display the same lack of balance—and therefore produce the same ambiguous outcome—of that earlier program? In answering this question, we should stress that the Merida Initiative is not a carbon copy of Plan Colombia, any more than the situation in Mexico today exactly duplicates that in Colombia a decade ago. In 1999 Colombia was afflicted by a relatively unified insurgency; in 2009 the Mexican cartels are a far more disparate—and often fratricidal—bunch. Plan Colombia involved hundreds of U.S. troops and private contractors that were intimately involved in Colombian military operations; Mexican officials have made clear that no U.S. military personnel will be allowed to operate in Mexico.

If the differences are important, however, the areas of convergence are perhaps more significant. The basic conceptual outlines are the same, as is the emphasis on interdiction and capacity-building. Moreover, the comments of U.S. officials reveal an expectation that the Merida Initiative is, in fact, the follow-on to previous U.S. programs in Colombia. "Just as the Medellin and Cali cartels were destroyed when law enforcement was provided with the equipment and intelligence

it needed to attack them," reports Scott Burns, ONDCP official, in testimony before a U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee, "the Merida Initiative provides tools to dismantle today's leading cartels and leave them with little space to regroup."[125] The Mexican government seems to be on the same wavelength, as groups of officials have recently visited Colombia for consultations on counternarcotics policy.[126]

There are scant indications, however, that the Merida Initiative will provide a better-rounded approach to counternarcotics than its antecedent. With respect to security and interdiction issues, to be sure, it does seem likely that the initiative will produce beneficial results. The delivery of helicopters will enhance the mobility of the government forces, augmenting their ability to react quickly, while the provision of surveillance aircraft and intelligence support will give the authorities greater informational awareness and allow them to deploy troops and police more intelligently. In light of the current "whack-a-mole" dynamic in Mexico, the value of these contributions is not to be underestimated.

U.S. equipment and training can be similarly useful in addressing some of the operational weaknesses that have hampered the performance of Mexican law enforcement. Advanced inspection equipment will force the cartels to adopt new smuggling tactics and routines. Secure communications capabilities can help Mexican police agencies overcome persistent coordination gaps, facilitate intelligence sharing, and allow them to mount a more cooperative effort.[127]

The Merida Initiative is also conducive to the expansion and institutionalization of existing bilateral projects. Since 2006, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials have conducted training programs designed to aid their Mexican counterparts

in impeding cash smuggling and other illicit financial flows.[128] Federal police units trained under Garcia Luna (who has a reputation for honesty and professionalism) have performed well when aided by intelligence gathered by the interagency Border Enforcement and Security Task Force (BEST) and other U.S. offices.[129] The Merida Initiative provides greater funding and a more regularized approach to such exchanges, and thus constitutes a way of locking in their positive effects.

Yet, as the history of Plan Colombia shows, a fully effective approach to counternarcotics will require going far beyond interdiction and security issues, and in this regard the outlook for the Merida Initiative is not particularly promising. Like Plan Colombia, the Merida Initiative focuses primarily on the most visible manifestations of the drug trade, rather than grappling seriously with the deeper, more difficult issues that drive that business.

This is certainly the case with respect to problems like corruption, human rights abuses, and the culture of impunity that have consistently undermined Calderon's counternarcotics program. The Merida Initiative is not silent on these issues (it contains a small amount of aid for judicial reform, several million dollars for police vetting purposes, and restrictions to ensure that U.S. officials do not interact with military units implicated in human rights violations), and Mexico is included in stand-alone U.S. human rights and anti-corruption programs. Still, the current American commitment to anti-corruption and the rule of law in Mexico is insufficient. Resources devoted to these issues pale in comparison to those spent on helicopters and inspection equipment, despite the fact that these tools will prove useful only if Mexico's institutions of internal order actually function in an

honest, professional manner. The Merida Initiative has only $1 million per year slated to aid in the reform of Mexico's courts—roughly one-quarter of 1 percent of first-year funding. Vetting programs receive similarly minor emphasis, and there are a number of issues central to any meaningful anti-corruption initiative—efforts to lessen the opacity of the banking system, for instance—that are not addressed at all. In short, while anti-corruption and human rights issues are not absent from U.S. policy toward Mexico under the Merida Initiative, they are not accorded the salience necessary, given the gravity and scope of these problems.[130]

The Merida Initiative is little better equipped to confront the other factors that have so far impeded progress in Mexico's drug war. As currently designed, the plan contains no social programs aimed at preventing youths from gravitating toward the cartels, nor does it feature economic development or poverty-alleviation initiatives. The U.S. experience in Colombia since 2000 demonstrates that a failure to present poor workers with legitimate work alternatives to criminal activity can have a debilitating impact on even the most aggressive counterdrug programs. On this score, the Merida Initiative leaves much to be desired.

Nor will the Merida program likely do much to deflect or impede the iron river of guns that supports drug-related violence in Mexico. The Merida Initiative overlaps somewhat a preexisting program known as Operation GUNRUNNER, which has received a recent funding increase. GUNRUNNER is meant to combat the illicit arms flow by tracing guns used in Mexico back to their origin in the United States. As this project has unfolded, however, it has been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of weapons heading south. While the ATF seized nearly 1,300 guns headed for Mexico last year, that number represents only a minuscule fraction

of the weapons that crossed the border *each month*.[131] Speaking anonymously, U.S. officials have conceded that, given the comparative laxity of U.S. gun laws, the difficulty of tracing weapons acquired through pawn shops or gun shows, and the porous nature of America's southern frontier, seeking to staunch the flow of guns with a few dozen extra ATF agents is a quixotic quest.[132] "If you can't deal with the issue of guns," one U.S. congressional aide involved in the drafting of the Merida Initiative admits, "you're not going to see much progress."[133]

The Merida Initiative is thus not being partnered with any real efforts to ramp up prevention, treatment, or other demand-side programs in the United States. Rather, the money spent on the Merida Initiative seems to have come at the expense of such programs. The budget for anti-drug-use advertising in the United States fell by more than half (from $140 million annually to $60 million) under the Bush administration, and the approval of the Merida Initiative occurred concurrent with a $73 million cut in domestic treatment programs.[134]

This is a short-sighted strategy. The GAO has recently released a study concluding that the U.S.-Mexican border is so porous that constricting cross-border drug flows is virtually impossible as long as a lucrative market for these products exists. "Given the temptation," says Garcia Luna, "there are people who are always going to play the game, whether by airplane or helicopter, by land, by sea, because there is a real market."[135] The Merida Initiative thus violates the inescapable mandate required of effective counternarcotics strategy: that while supply-side programs are politically popular and produce attractive statistics, unless they are paired with demand-side initiatives, they tend to produce few long-lasting gains.

In congressional hearings on the Merida Initiative prior to its passage, Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY), head of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, offered a pessimistic appraisal of the program:

> As long as there is demand for illegal narcotics in the United States, suppliers will sell their cocaine and heroin and other drugs on our streets, and as long as the narcotraffickers are armed with guns from the United States the brutal violence of the drug gangs will continue unabated. . . . This is my concern with the Merida Initiative. . . . We will spend more than $1 billion on security assistance for Mexico and Central America over the next 2 years, but it is not clear that we are stepping up our efforts so we can cement the gains the Merida Initiative is designed to achieve abroad.[136]

In view of the evidence adduced earlier, it is hard to quarrel with this assessment. The Mexican drug trade thrives on deeply embedded pathologies such as U.S. demand, cross-border gunrunning, poverty and corruption in Mexico, and the institutional deficiencies of the Mexican state. So far, a combination of these problems has frustrated President Calderon's offensive, ensuring that record numbers of arrests and seizures have resulted in little lasting reduction in either internal violence or drug exports. At present, it is unrealistic to expect that the Merida Initiative will contribute substantially to resolving these ills. It thus seems improbable that the initiative will be more than of temporary benefit in reducing the drug trade and drug-related violence in Mexico.

THE WAY FORWARD

A thoroughgoing revision of U.S. counterdrug policy is therefore needed. U.S. officials must craft a more

comprehensive and coherent strategy than currently exists, one that addresses not just the symptoms of the disease, but its causes as well. Admiral James Stavridis, head of U.S. Southern Command, has recently commented that the United States and its partners must adopt a "more holistic, integrated approach" to security threats in the Western Hemisphere. Those charged with making U.S. counternarcotics policy would do well to heed his advice.[137]

Such an approach should consist of five essential elements: (1) traditional counternarcotics operations such as security and interdiction; (2) anti-corruption and human rights; (3) government institutional development; (4) economic and social development; and (5) measures to reduce America's homegrown contributions to the drug trade. Unlike the current paradigm, under which several of these themes are included but relegated to a distinctly secondary position, each of these five elements must be an integral part of counterdrug policy and receive adequate funding and official attention. A useful analogy in this regard would be a successful counterinsurgency in which the use of force must be integrated seamlessly into a larger scheme of political, military, social, diplomatic, and economic programs, all of which reinforce—rather than competing with or undermining—one another.

Security and Interdiction.

For all the liabilities of security- and interdiction-focused efforts, they remain vital components of any comprehensive counterdrug program. Economic development and political reform cannot occur in a context of violent anarchy, any more than internal order can be sustained if these deeper problems remain

unresolved. Similarly, while interdiction has often been treated as a panacea, if practiced successfully it can keep the cartels off-balance by disrupting their operations and raising the costs of doing business.

The assistance currently accorded priority under the Merida Initiative (aid in developing rapid deployment, surveillance, and detection capabilities, and training in counternarcotics operations) constitutes a good start in this regard, and should be complemented with additional initiatives in the coming years. The United States can provide nonlethal aid like body armor to the Mexican police, establish institutional frameworks for intelligence-sharing and cross-border interagency cooperation on issues like money laundering, and assist the Mexican police and military in conducting psychological and information operations. The brutality of groups like the Zetas—and their skill in publicizing these exploits—currently permits the cartels to dominate the information environment. The Mexican government must confront this issue if it hopes to redress the current sense of public insecurity. Since 2000, U.S. advisers in Colombia have helped that country's military and law enforcement agencies implement psychological operations to defeat guerrilla propaganda and weaken insurgent morale; similar efforts would seem to be in order under the Merida Initiative.[138]

Anti-Corruption and Human Rights.

Of course, any benefits reaped from such assistance will be ephemeral at best if the forces of order in Mexico continue to be penetrated by cartel informants and perceived by the public as "brutal corrupt thugs."[139] The current U.S. prohibition on training foreign

military units implicated in human rights violations and the allocation of several million dollars for vetting purposes represent a basic recognition of this issue, but in going forward Washington must place much greater stress on this problem than is presently the case.

Beyond augmenting the resources devoted to Calderon's anti-corruption campaign, the United States can take several other steps. As they have already begun to do in Central America, U.S. agencies should offer regular personnel exchanges meant to promote a culture of professionalism within Mexican law enforcement and greater awareness of human rights issues within the military. Similarly, the United States should pay particular attention to helping Calderon create the small, specially vetted units that he intends to use for sensitive missions, and insist that any police units receiving access to U.S. intelligence or funding undergo rigorous, comprehensive screening. Finally, while Mexican political and historical sensitivities preclude direct military-to-military human rights training within that country, the United States can strengthen the human rights framework in Mexico by offering financial and technical assistance to the agencies charged with investigating and prosecuting suspected abuses. Though it would be wildly unrealistic to expect that these measures will end the problems of corruption and immunity to punishment in Mexico, they can, if sustained, begin to ameliorate these difficulties and create a core of professionalized security officials.

Institutional Development.

Efforts to help strengthen weak judicial institutions so far make up a very small part of the Merida Initiative,

but improving and expanding U.S. engagement on these issues is critical. The United States should offer to assist Mexico in developing specific anti-gang and anti-cartel laws, and the various U.S. agencies with special expertise in fighting organized crime can provide aid in fashioning effective prosecution strategies. The United States already has professional exchanges that focus on these issues in place vis-à-vis several Central American nations; if extended to Mexico, such programs can offer a relatively inexpensive way of making that country's legal system better suited to tackling current threats.

Even more important will be greater support for President Calderon's new initiative to modernize judicial procedures by permitting the use of oral evidence, conducting open rather than secret proceedings, and improving the transparency and efficiency of the Mexican court system. Central American countries working with the financial and technical assistance of USAID have had some success in conducting such reforms and making their legal systems more accessible to the population. Similar cooperation will be essential in Mexico.[140]

Economic and Social Development.

Over the long term, the success of counternarcotics in Mexico will hinge in no small part on the government's ability to address the economic grievances and social alienation that often inform criminal activity. The security threats that the United States confronts in the Western Hemisphere, Admiral Stavridis has recently written, "are symptoms of the deeper endemic problems of poverty and inequality."[141]

Setting aside the herculean economic and financial problems now facing Mexico—and indeed all the

world's nations—as a result of the current global economic meltdown, efforts to relieve the endemic strains should focus on the micro level rather than the macro. The need will be for small-scale, precisely targeted projects that alleviate the endemic poverty that has long afflicted much of the country and provide economic and social alternatives to criminal activity for populations at risk. Micro-finance and vocational training programs provide good examples of such initiatives, which have already been used for counternarcotics and anti-organized crime purposes in Central America. A pilot program in El Salvador recently reintegrated roughly 300 former gang members into society by offering training in carpentry, screen-printing, and other such activities, and the Inter-American Development Bank has approved a $32 million loan to Honduras for a micro-entrepreneurship program aimed at vulnerable youths.[142] These programs should be replicated on a broader scale in Mexico, along with sustained and sufficiently funded alternative development projects that will provide economic incentives for marijuana farmers to switch to legal crops.

Guns and Users: U.S. Domestic Contributions.

Due to the political controversy that surrounds issues like gun laws and U.S. domestic demand, these questions may well prove to be the thorniest aspects of counternarcotics policy. With respect to demand, the debate on this issue is often framed as a choice between legalization and enforcement. In reality, this is false dichotomy. Studies by the RAND Corporation have shown that, if funded properly, prevention and treatment initiatives—running the gamut from anti-drug-use advertising to education to

addict rehabilitation—can have a significant impact in countering domestic drug use and thereby lowering demand. These studies conclude, in fact, that in a dollar-for-dollar sense, prevention and treatment are far more efficient and economical than enforcement and interdiction. One dollar spent on the former category, RAND calculates, carries the same effect as 7.3 dollars spent on the latter.[143] Accordingly, the Merida Initiative must be married to an expansion—rather than the present contraction—of a wide range of treatment and prevention programs. Doing so would hardly solve the problem of domestic drug use, but it could have a strong positive impact on the problem and bring Washington's internal efforts in line with its energetic counternarcotics programs abroad.

Regarding guns, one relatively uncontroversial solution would be a dramatic expansion of funding for ATF programs designed to trace weapons used in Mexico to their sources in the United States and impede them from being smuggled across the border. Such an undertaking would certainly have a positive effect on the current discouraging situation, but the beneficial impact would likely not be sufficient. The U.S.-Mexican border is simply too porous to prevent determined smugglers from carrying their goods across the frontier, and U.S. gun laws currently impede the ATF and other federal agencies from being aggressively proactive in their efforts to restrict sales to potential smugglers.[144] "There are very, very strict limits set on what [the ATF is] allowed to do," says one expert.[145] In short, dealing successfully with the "iron river" may require far more controversial changes in U.S. gun laws, such as renewing the assault weapons ban, establishing a national registry of arms sales, and other restrictive measures. Admittedly, whether such proposals are politically feasible remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

As the apparent intractability of the gun issue demonstrates, crafting a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy will be no easy undertaking. Doing so will require going past the politically popular aspects of counternarcotics, such as interdiction, and zeroing in on more contested issues like guns and demand. In financial terms, funding at the necessary levels all of the programs discussed above will involve expenditures considerably beyond those already approved for Plan Merida. Moreover, creating such a program will entail a determined effort by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to ensure that counternarcotics receives sustained executive-level attention and that the myriad agencies involved—ranging from the ATF to USAID—achieve the coordination necessary to preclude one aspect of this strategy from countering the efforts of the others. Finally, it bears repeating that the inter-hemispheric drug trade is so entrenched that even a "perfect" counternarcotics strategy will produce meaningful progress only over the long term.

The costs of action are therefore high, but the price of inaction would be exponentially greater. The effects of drug use in the United States and the potential for the economic and political destabilization of Mexico make counternarcotics an immensely significant national security issue. Addressing this problem effectively will require substantial economic resources and political capital, but, given the stakes, the investment is a necessary one. American policymakers must seize on the current crisis to achieve a balanced counternarcotics policy, one that not only strengthens Mexico's forces of order but also addresses the underlying issues that

have long nourished the drug trade and made it so violent. If they do so, the United States may finally begin to make sustainable progress in curbing narcotics smuggling and its devastating effects. It they do not, the Merida Initiative will simply go down as one more failed offensive in the long campaign against drugs.

ENDNOTES

1. "Es provocación cabeza arrojada en alcaldia de Acapulco" ("Head Thrown at Acapulco Mayor's Office is Provocation"), *La Crónica,* June 30, 2006.

2. *Ibid*.

3. Office of the Spokesman, "Joint Statement on the Merida Initiative: A New Paradigm for Security Cooperation," Washington, DC: Department of State, October 22, 2007, *www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/oct/93817.htm,* accessed September 22, 2008.

4. John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency," *Small Wars Journal,* August 19, 2008, pp. 1-2, *smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/84-sullivan.pdf*, accessed September 12, 2008.

5. Adam Isacson, "The U.S. Military in the War on Drugs," in Coletta Youngers and Eileen Rosin, eds., *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005, p. 45; Antonio Nicao and Lee Lamothe, *Angels, Mobsters, and Narco-Terrorists: The Rising Menace of Global Criminal Empires,* Ontario, Canada: John Wiley and Sons, 2005, p. 196.

6. Colleen Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 25, 2008, p. 4; "'La Barbie' Part of New Gang Generation," *El Universal,* December 5, 2005.

7. National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2007,* October 2006, *www.usdoj.gov/ndic/*

pubs21/21137/21137p.pdf, accessed December 2, 2008; "Does the Merida Initiative Represent a New Direction in U.S.-Mexico Relations, or Does it Simply Refocus the Issue Elsewhere?" Washington, DC: Council on Hemispheric Affairs, December 14, 2007, *www.coha.org/2007/12/does-the-merida-initiative-represent-a-new-direction-for-us-mexico-relations-or-does-it-simply-refocus-the-issue-elsewhere/,* accessed November 2, 2008.

8. Manuel Roig-Francia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Move North," *Washington Post,* September 20, 2007.

9. Richard B. Craig, "Mexican Narcotics Traffic: Binational Security Implications," in Donald J. Mabry, ed., *The Latin American Narcotics Trade and U.S. National Security,* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989, pp. 28-30, 33-34.

10. George Grayson, "Mexico and the Drug Cartels," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, August 2007, *www.fpri.org/enotes/200708.grayson.mexicodrugcartels.html,* accessed September 14, 2008.

11. Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, "The Long War of Genaro García Luna," *New York Times,* July 13, 2008.

12. *Ibid*.

13. Good descriptions of the cartels and their alliances can be found in "'La Federación,' el cártel mas poderoso de México" ("'The Federation': Mexico's Most Powerful Cartel"), *El Universal,* January 22, 2008; *U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts but the Flow of Illicit Drugs into the United States Remains High*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, October 2007, pp. 10-11; Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*.

14. Quoted in "Alianza entre narcos forma nuevo cártel, 'La Federación': DEA" ("Alliance Between Narcos Forms New Cartel, 'The Federation': DEA"), *El Universal,* August 18, 2006.

15. Gustavo Castillo Garcia, "Los Beltrán Leyva y el cártel Milenio se separan de la *Federación*" ("The Beltran Levyas and the Milenio Cartel Separate from the *Federation*"), *La Jornada,* January 30, 2008; "Los Beltrán se unen al cártel del Golfo y Zetas" ("The

Beltrans Join the Golf Cartel and Zetas"), *Aldíatx.com,* May 20, 2008, accessed November 26, 2008.

16. David Freddoso, "Mexican Deserters Cast Shadow on Border City," *Human Events,* February 9, 2004, *findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3827/is_/ai_n9385997*, accessed October 14, 2008; George Grayson, "Los Zetas: The Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel," *www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html*, accessed July 17, 2008. There appears to be no truth to the rumor that the Zetas were trained by U.S. instructors. It is possible, however, that the group was trained by instructors who had themselves received U.S. training. Telephone interview conducted by the author with DEA official (#1), July 24, 2008.

17. Telephone interview conducted by the author with DEA official (#2), July 24, 2008; Alfredo Corchado, "Drug Cartels Operate Training Camps near Texas Border Just inside Mexico," *Dallas Morning News,* April 4, 2008; "Drug Cartels and Regional Integration," *The New American,* October 31, 2005, *www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-11898149_ITM*, accessed December 1, 2008; Grayson, "Los Zetas."

18. National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2008*, *www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs25/25921/25921p.pdf,* accessed July 24, 2008.

19. Grayson, "Los Zetas."

20. Colleen W. Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels,* Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 16, 2007, p. 8.

21. Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

22. Sullivan and Elkus, "Mexico's Criminal Insurgency," p. 7.

23. Laurence Iliff, "Violence Erupting Throughout Mexico Linked to Drug Cartels," *Dallas Morning News,* February 6, 2007.

24. Telephone interview conducted by the author with ATF official Ralph Jones, Houston Field Division, December 22, 2008; Luis Acosta, "Mexico: The Cartels Adopt Improvised Incendiary Devices," *Stratfor Today,* July 16, 2008; "Mexico's Drug War:

A Society at Risk," Washington, DC: Council on Hemispheric Affairs, May 22, 2007, *www.coha.org/2007/05/mexicos-drug-war-a-society-at-risk-soldiers-versus-narco-soldiers/*, accessed July 28, 2008; "Detienen a 11 narcos al catear 3 casas en el DF" ("11 Narcos Detained in Search of 3 Houses in Federal District"), *El Siglo de Torreón,* January 23, 2008.

25. John Baram, "An 'Iron River of Guns,' Flows South," *Security Management,* June 2008; *www.securitymanagement.com/article/iron-river-guns-flows-south*, accessed November 24, 2008.

26. Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

27. Corchado, "Drug Cartels Operate Training Camps"; "Mexican Government Sends 6500 Troops to State Scarred by Drug Violence, Beheadings," *International Herald Tribune,* December 11, 2006; Grayson, "Mexico and the Drug Cartels."

28. Sean Matteson, "Commando Attack Leaves 7 Officers Dead," *San Antonio Express-News,* December 29, 2007.

29. Grayson, "Los Zetas"; Barnard Thompson, "Military Casualties in Mexico's Anti-Drug War," May 7, 2007, *Mexidata, mexidata.info/id1358.html*, accessed November 22, 2008; Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Federal Police Official Killed in Mexico City," *Washington Post,* June 27, 2008.

30. Quoted in Stephanie Hansen, "Mexico's Drug War," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, November 20, 2008, *www.cfr.org/publication/13689/#6*, accessed December 4, 2008. On recent truce talks, see Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico Drug Bosses May Have Set Truce," *Los Angeles Times,* January 29, 2009.

31. Corchado, "Drug Cartels Operate Training Camps."

32. Mark Stevenson, "Mexican Candidates Tough on Drug Issue," *Washington Post,* June 18, 2006.

33. Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits," *Washington Post,* May 7, 2008; Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War." Opponents of the *Zetas* have responded in kind; a video of a Zeta being decapitated was posted on YouTube

in 2007. "Homicidio de presunto zeta en Internet" ("Homicide of Presumed Zeta on Internet"), *Correo,* April 2, 2007.

34. Grayson, "Los Zetas."

35. Jens Erik Gould, "Mexico's Drug War Turns into Terrorism After Grenades," *Bloomberg,* October 20, 2008, *www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=a0FjWAwPxUY8&refer=home*, accessed November 25, 2008; Adam Thomson, "Drug Cartels 'Threaten' Mexican Democracy," *Financial Times,* July 13, 2008; David McLemore, "U.S. Officials Praise Mexico for Anti-Drug Efforts," *Dallas Morning News,* August 12, 2008.

36. George Grayson, "Surge Two," Center for Immigration Studies Report, October 27, 2008, *www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=3841DDDC-CF92-43EC-BB94-E1C071D31220*, accessed November 26, 2008.

37. Interview conducted by the author with a DEA official, July 23, 2008. On this point, see also Max G. Manwaring, *A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and Brazil,* Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007, pp. 27-29.

38. Grayson, "Surge Two."

39. See, for instance, John P. Sullivan, "Transnational Gangs: The Impact of Third-Generation Gangs in Central America," *Air & Space Power Journal,* July 2008, *www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2008/2trimes08.htm*, accessed July 15, 2008; and Sullivan, "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels and Net Warriors," *Crime and International Justice,* Vol. 13, November 1997, pp. 95-108.

40. See Max Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2005; and Manwaring, *Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty*.

41. United Nations Development Program, *Cuanto Cuesta la Violencia a El Salvador?* New York: UNDP, 2005, esp. pp. 9, 37; "Gangs

and Crime In Latin America," Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 109th Cong., 1st Sess., April 20, 2005, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006, p. 9; U.S. Agency for International Development, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,* Washington, DC: Office of Regional Sustainable Development, April 2006, pp. 20-22.

42. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Tackling Transnational Crime: Adapting U.S. National Security Policy," July 18, 2008, *www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/spring_latin_america_felbabbrown.aspx?p=1*, accessed September 28, 2008.

43. Gould, "Mexico's Drug War."

44. Silvia Garduño, "Crece con Calderón la migración a EU" ("Migration to the U.S. Grows with Calderon"), *Reforma,* September 21, 2008.

45. Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Background Note: Mexico," Washington, DC: Department of State, April 2008, *www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35749.htm*, accessed July 28, 2008; Ray Walser, "Mexico, Drug Cartels, and the Merida Initiative: A Fight We Cannot Afford to Lose," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 2163, July 23, 2008, *www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/bg2163.cfm*, accessed October 31, 2008.

46. Telephone interview conducted by the author with DEA agent, El Paso Field Office, November 25, 2008; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Statement of Marcy M. Forman, Director," March 1, 2006, *www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/testimonies/060301homeland.pdf*, accessed October 18, 2008.

47. Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Mexican Cartels and the Fallout from Phoenix," *Stratfor,* July 2, 2008, *www.stratfor.com/weekly/mexican_cartels_and_fallout_phoenix*, accessed December 1, 2008; Corchado, "Drug Cartels Operate Training Camps."

48. David T. Johnson, "The Merida Initiative: Examining U.S. Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations," June 5, 2008, *www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/105695.htm*, accessed November 14, 2008.

49. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Statement of Marcy M. Forman, Director."

50. Walser, "A Fight We Cannot Afford to Lose."

51. "México promete luchar la 'madre de todas las batallas' contra el narcotráfico" ("Mexico Promises to Fight the 'Mother of All Battles' against the Drug Trade"), January 22, 2005, *VOA News, www.voanews.com/spanish/archive/2005-01/a-2005-01-22-2-1.cfm?renderforprint=1&textonly=1&&TEXTMODE=1&CFID=70719036&CFTOKEN=37020507*, accessed November 1, 2008.

52. Ioan Grillo, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency," *Time,* June 23, 2008, *www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1707070,00.html,* accessed November 14, 2008.

53. Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Mexico Launches 8th Offensive in Its Drive Against Drug Cartels," *Washington Post,* December 1, 2007; Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*, p. 13.

54. White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, "White House Drug Czar Releases Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy," October 2, 2007, *whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press07/100207.html*, accessed July 23, 2008; Grayson, "Los Zetas."

55. *U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts*, p. 11; White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, "White House Drug Czar Releases Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy," October 2, 2007, *whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press07/100207.html,* accessed July 23, 2008.

56. Telephone interview conducted by the author with a DEA official, July 23, 2008.

57. Catherine Bremer, "Once-Quiet Towns Engulfed by Mexico Drugs War," *Reuters,* July 17, 2007, *uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKN1731355220070718,* accessed October 14, 2008.

58. Laurence Iliff and Alfredo Corchado, "Mexican President Losing War on Drugs, Polls Indicate," *Dallas Morning News,* June 7, 2008.

59. Quoted in Grayson, "Surge Two."

60. Alfredo Corchado, "In Nuevo Laredo, Death Becoming a Way of Life," *Dallas Morning News,* May 23, 2006.

61. Jose de Cordoba and David Luhnow, "Mexican Officials Allege Drug Cartel Infiltrated Attorney General's Office," *Wall Street Journal,* October 28, 2008.

62. Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*, p. 9.

63. Roig-Franzia, "Mexico Launches 8th Offensive"; Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

64. Cook, "Mexico's Drug Cartels," p. 9.

65. De Cordoba and Luhnow, "Mexican Officials Allege Drug Cartel Infiltrated Attorney General's Office."

66. Thomson, "Drug Cartels 'Threaten' Mexican Democracy."

67. Alberto Najar, "Desertaron 100 mil militares con Fox" ("100,000 Soldiers Deserted under Fox"), *Milenio,* July 20, 2007; "Mexico's Internal Drug War," *Power and Interest News Report,* August 14, 2006, *www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=540&language_id=1*, accessed December 1, 2008; Grayson, "Surge Two."

68. Roig-Franzia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits."

69. Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

70. Dan Keane, "Mexican Military Losing Drug War Support," *Washington Post,* July 25, 2008.

71. Sarah Miller Llana, "Military Abuses Rise in Mexican Drug War," *Christian Science Monitor,* June 24, 2008; "Does the Merida Initiative Represent a New Direction in U.S.-Mexico Relations, or Does it Simply Refocus the Issue Elsewhere?" Council on Hemispheric Affairs.

72. Keane, "Mexican Military Losing Drug War Support."

73. Roig-Franzia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits."

74. *USAID, Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,* pp. 40-41.

75. Laurence Iliff and Alfredo Corchado, "2 Mexican States Trying Out New Justice System," *Dallas Morning News*, August 18, 2008.

76. Grayson, "Mexico and the Drug Cartels."

77. "Mexico Country Brief," Washington, DC: World Bank, *web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/MEXICOEXTN/0,contentMDK:20185184~menuPK:338403~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:338397,00.html,* accessed February 9, 2009.

78. Roig-Franzia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits."

79. Grayson, "Mexico and the Drug Cartels."

80. Roig-Franzia, "Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits."

81. "Gangs and Crime in Latin America," p. 14.

82. Kurz-Phelan, "Long War."

83. Baram, "'Iron River'"; Gustavo Castillo García, "Armas Robadas en EU, en poder de narcos" ("Arms Stolen in the U.S., in Possession of Narcos"), *La Jornada,* January 23, 2008; "Statement of

William Hoover, Assistant Director for Field Operations, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives," February 7, 2008, *foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/hoo020708.htm*, accessed October 10, 2008.

84. Telephone interview conducted by the author with ATF official Ralph Jones, Houston Field Office, December 22, 2008; Mario Vázquez Raña, "'No vamos a fallar,' compromiso del secretario de Seguridad Publica" ("'We Are Not Going to Fail': Promise of the Secretary of Public Security"), *El Sol del Bajío,* July 6, 2008; Peter DeShazo and Johanna Mendelson Forman, "Making the Most of Merida," August 2008, *www.csis.org/media/csis/press/080809_merida_op_ed__english.pdf*, accessed December 3, 2008.

85. "Confirma México 7 mil mdd para 'Iniciativa Mérida'" ("Mexico Confirms $7 Billion for 'Merida Initiative'"), *OEM en linea,* October 23, 2007.

86. "Pide FCH extender Iniciativa Mérida en todo el continente" (FCH Seeks to Extend Merida Initiative to the Entire Continent"), *Diario de México*, October 8, 2008; "Ampliaría Obama ayuda de Iniciativa Mérida" ("Obama Would Expand Merida Initiative Aid"), *El Universal,* May 23, 2008; David T. Johnson, "Remarks on the Merida Initiative," March 11, 2008, *www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/102111.htm,* accessed November 14, 2008.

87. "The Merida Initiative: United-States-Mexico-Central America Security Cooperation," Department of State Fact Sheet, October 22, 2007, *www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/oct/93800.htm*, accessed August 11, 2008.

88. "Joint Statement on the Merida Initiative."

89. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Merida Initiative: "Guns, Drugs, and Friends,"* 110th Congr., 1st Sess., December 21, 2007, pp. 3-4.

90. Funding breakdowns can be found in *"Guns, Drugs, and Friends"*; Colleen Cook, Rebecca Rush, and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Merida Initiative: Proposed U.S. Anticrime and Counterdrug Assistance*

for Mexico and Central America, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 3, 2008, pp. 1-6.

91. See, for instance, Antonio Aguilera, "La Iniciativa Mérida vendría a incrementar las violaciones a las garantías individuales" ("The Merida Initiative Would Come to Increase Violations of Individual Guarantees"), *La Jornada,* June 26, 2008; Laura Carlsen, "Hemispheric Conference Against Militarization Says No to Merida Initiative, U.S. Military Bases," October 17, 2008, *americas.irc-online.org/am/5605*, accessed December 3, 2008.

92. Vázquez Raña, "'No vamos a fallar'"; "Pide FCH extender Iniciativa Mérida en todo el continente."

93. USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,* pp. 40-41.

94. "Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice Is Interviewed by Televisa," *Political Transcript Wire,* October 24, 2008, Proquest Newspaper Database, *www.proquest.com*, accessed December 1, 2008.

95. U.S. House of Representative, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcomittee on the Western Hemisphere, *U.S. Obligations under the Merida Initiative*, 110th Congr., 2nd Sess., February 7, 2008, p. 20.

96. Liana Sun Wyler, *International Drug Control Policy*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 23, 2008, p. 3.

97. *Ibid*., pp. 2-3, 12.

98. Thomas Marks, "A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs. FARC," *Military Review,* March-April 2007, p. 41.

99. Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability,* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001, p. 11; "Pentagon Official Testifies Before House Committee on Plan Colombia," September 21, 2000, *www.fas.org/irp/news/2000/09/irp-000921-colombia.htm*, accessed August 28, 2008.

100. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth,* pp. 6, 17.

101. Francisco E. Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs, Economy, and Society in the Andes,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 105; Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth,* pp. 17, 24, 35-42; Peter DeShazo, Tanya Primiani, and Phillip McLean, *Back from the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999-2007,* Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2007, p. 7.

102. Stephen P. Weiler, *Colombia: Gateway to Defeating Transnational Hell in the Western Hemisphere*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, May 2004, pp. 3-4.

103. Donnie Marshall, "Plan Colombia: An Initial Assessment," February 28, 2001, *drugcaucus.senate.gov/colombia01marshall.html*, accessed November 22, 2008; see also General Peter Pace, "Plan Colombia: An Initial Assessment," February 28, 2001, *drugcaucus.senate.gov/colombia01pace.html*, accessed November 22, 2008.

104. Virginia Bouvier, "Evaluating U.S. Policy in Colombia: A Policy Report from the IRC Americas Program," May 11, 2005, pp. 6-7, *americas.irc-online.org/pdf/reports/0505colombia.pdf*, accessed November 3, 2008; *Drug Control: U.S. Nonmilitary Assistance to Colombia Is Beginning to Show Intended Results, but Programs Are Not Readily Sustainable*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 2004, pp. 1-8; Steven Dudley, "U.S. Pulls Out of Colombian Coca Region," *Miami Herald,* November 20, 2006.

105. "Written Statement of General James T. Hill before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," October 29, 2003, *www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/news/2003/10/sec-031030-usia03.htm*, accessed August 26, 2008; "Civilian Contractors and U.S. Military Personnel Supporting Plan Colombia," May 15, 2001, *www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2001/3509.htm*, accessed August 26, 2008; "Link between the Manta Air Base and Bombing Raid by Colombia on a FARC Guerrilla," *Noticias Financieras,* March 24, 2008.

106. Gabriel Marcella, *The United States and Colombia: The Journey from Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity,* Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003, p. 44; Michael Easterbrook, "Colombia Enticing Tired Guerrillas to Give up Arms," *Boston Globe,* July 20, 2003.

107. Marks, "A Model Counterinsurgency," pp. 46-48; Connie Veillette, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 22, 2005, pp. 10-11.

108. G. Guillen, "Venezuela ya entregó armas a las FARC" ("Venezuela Already Turned Over Arms to the FARC"), *El Nuevo Herald,* May 19, 2008.

109. "Pentagon Official Testifies Before House Committee on Plan Colombia," September 21, 2000, *www.fas.org/irp/news/2000/09/irp-000921-colombia.htm*, accessed August 28, 2008.

110. Robert Charles, "Foreign Policy and Colombia," *Washington Times,* April 23, 2007; Veillette, *Plan Colombia*, p. 5.

111. "General Discusses U.S. Strategic Objectives for Hemisphere," UNINFO Webchat Transcript, June 12, 2007, *www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2007/June/20070612142728xjsnommis0.6757013.html*, accessed August 28, 2008; Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Transit Zone Interdiction Operations," undated, *www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit_zone_interdic_op.html,* accessed September 22, 2008.

112. Michelle L. Farrell, *Sequencing: Targeting Insurgents and Drugs in Colombia*, Newport, RI: Naval Postgraduate School, Master's Thesis, 2007, p. 14; Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2007*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, p. 3.

113. Sun Wyler, "International Drug Control Policy," p. 27.

114. The GAO estimates that in 2002, total estimated cocaine flow to the United States was between 460 and 760 metric tons, with 21-35 percent of those shipments either seized or disrupted. In 2006, total estimated cocaine flow was between 460 and 1010 metric

tons, with 22-47 percent seized or disrupted. According to these estimates, the amount of cocaine satisfying U.S. domestic demand was thus between 299 and 600 metric tons in 2002, and between 244 and 787 metric tons in 2006. At best, then, U.S. consumption declined by 55 metric tons, while at worst it may have increased by more than 187 metric tons. For these figures, see *Drug Control: Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 2008, p. 24.

115. Steven Dudley, "An Imperfect Plan," *Miami Herald,* April 9, 2006; Ted Galen Carpenter, *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America,* New York: Palgrave, 2003, p. 107.

116. Michael Deal, "USAID Official Testifies on Andean Regional Initiative," July 11, 2001, *bogota.usembassy.gov/topics_of_interest/alternative-development/toiad071101.html*, accessed August 28, 2008.

117. USAID Data Sheets, *www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2005/lac/pdf/514-009.pdf*, accessed August 26, 2008; Alan Borque, *Changing U.S. Strategy in South America: Adjusting and Exporting Plan Colombia*, U.S. Army War College, Master's Thesis, 2004, p. 4.

118. Danna Harman, "Rethinking Plan Colombia: Some Ways to Fix It," *Christian Science Monitor,* September 29, 2006.

119. Dudley, "U.S. Pulls Out of Colombian Coca Region."

120. Farrell, *Targeting Insurgents and Drugs in Colombia,* pp. 46-47.

121. Adam Isacson, "Plan Colombia—Six Years Later: Report of a CIP Staff Visit to Putumayo and Medellín, Colombia," *International Policy Report,* November 2006, pp. 3-7.

122. Bouvier, "Evaluating U.S. Policy in Colombia"; Harman, "Rethinking Plan Colombia."

123. "Visit to Cucuta, on Colombian-Venezuelan Border," November 15, 1999, Electronic Briefing Book 166, National Security Archive, *www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB166/index.htm*, accessed August 26, 2008.

124. *Colombia: Issues for Congress,* Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 9, 2007, p. 10.

125. Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *U.S. Obligations under the Merida Initiative,* p. 20.

126. "Mexico/USA Politics: Anti-Drug Aid on the Way," *Stratfor Today, Economist Intelligence Unit ViewsWire,* July 2, 2008, Proquest Newspaper Database, *www.proquest.com*, accessed November 26, 2008.

127. "Mexico: The Long Road to Security Reform," *Stratfor Today* October 1, 2008, *www.stratfor.com/analysis/20081001_mexico_long_road_security_reform*, accessed December 4, 2008.

128. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Statement of Marcy M. Forman, Director"; *U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counter-Narcotics Efforts, but Tons of Illicit Drugs Continue to Flow into the United States*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, August 2007, pp. 22-23.

129. Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War"; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Statement of Marcy M. Forman."

130. Iliff and Corchado, "2 Mexican States Trying Out New Justice System."

131. Baram, "'Iron River of Guns.'"

132. Telephone interview conducted by the author with an ATF official, December 22, 2008.

133. Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

134. Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *U.S. Obligations under the Merida Initiative*, p. 43; Marcela Sanchez, "U.S. Antes Up to Fight Drugs in Mexico, As It Cuts Funding for Programs Here," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* February 15, 2008.

135. *U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts, but the Flow of Illicit Drugs into the United States Remains High*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, October 2007, pp. 5-6**;** Kurtz-Phelan, "Long War."

136. Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *U.S. Obligations under the Merida Initiative*, p. 2.

137. Admiral James Stavridis, U.S. Navy, "We're All in This Together," *Americas Quarterly,* Fall 2007, p. 36.

138. Michael Hirsh, "A Smarter Way to Fight," *Newsweek,* July 21, 2008, pp. 40-41.

139. Felbab-Brown, "Tackling Transnational Crime."

140. USAID*, Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,* pp. 13-14.

141. Stavridis, "We're All in This Together," p. 38; see also Jorge Castaneda and Patricio Navia, "Of Democracy and Dinero," *National Interest Online,* July 2, 2008, *www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=18702*, accessed July 10, 2008.

142. USAID*, Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,* 30.

143. C. Peter Rydell and Susan Everingham, *Controlling Cocaine: Supply Versus Demand Programs,* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1994, *www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/RAND_MR331.sum.pdf***,** accessed August 20, 2008.

144. Telephone interview conducted by the author with ATF official, December 22, 2008.

145. Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Does the Merida Initiative Represent a New Direction in U.S.-Mexico Relations, or Does it Simply Refocus the Issue Elsewhere?"