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Mexico's Drug War Body Count Mounts

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The past two weeks have produced yet more gruesome episodes in Mexico's bloody drug wars. Mass graves discovered in northern Mexico contain at least 145 bodies, ^[3] up from 116 three days ^[4] earlier. And that toll may grow. An already bad security environment in Mexico continues to worsen. On April 8, The U.S. consulate in Monterrey issued—and then in a most curious move, later rescinded—a warning ^[5] to Americans that they were increasingly likely to be cartel targets in three northern Mexican states.

More than 37,000 people have perished in the violence since President Felipe Calderon sent the military after the drug cartels in December 2006. Despite the growing tally of victims, Calderon insists on staying the course with a tenacity worthy of George W. Bush and his misguided crusade in Iraq.

But public disenchantment is mounting ^[6]. A well-known journalist and poet, Javier Sicilia, led a large march in early April after his son, Francisco, was killed. The war on drugs is not working, he stated bluntly to reporters. "The mafias are here. We should make a pact." It's a sentiment that thousands of grieving parents—and millions of other Mexicans—now share. "There has been an important sea change of opinion," a prominent professor at Mexico's National Autonomous University concludes. "People are no longer buying the story that things have to get worse before they get better."

There are growing calls even within the president's own National Action Party for a change in strategy. The most famous defector to date is Calderon's immediate predecessor, Vicente Fox. Last September, Fox put a post on his personal blog, signaling an emphatic break ^[7] with his successor's approach to the drug problem.

The former president called for a rapid withdrawal of the military from internal security missions—the centerpiece of the current strategy. In a barb clearly directed at Calderon, Fox asserted that the rampant violence was damaging the country's reputation internationally and undermining the government's legitimacy domestically. He stressed ^[8] that "the first responsibility of a government is to provide security for the people and their possessions." But "today, we find that, unfortunately, the Mexican government is not complying with that responsibility."

Calderon utterly spurns all suggestions, even from political allies, of seeking a truce with the drug cartels. Under some circumstances, such courage of convictions might be admirable. President Obama clearly recognized that trait in his Mexican counterpart, at one point praising him as Mexico's Elliot Ness—the "Untouchable" federal law enforcement official in the 1920s who took on Al Capone, Frank Nitti, and other bootleggers and organized crime figures.

There is no doubt about Calderon's personal and political courage. It would have been easier—and certainly safer—for him to emulate the largely phony anti-drug campaigns that a long line of predecessors waged. They did just enough to placate Washington without antagonizing those powerful cartels that were willing to keep the violence in bounds and continue to provide generous bribes to elected and appointed officials. It took boldness to abandon that model so dramatically.

But while Calderon's courage may deserve admiration, his judgment does not. Observers might ponder whether the model for Felipe Calderon's behavior is not Elliott Ness but another figure from U.S. history, General Ambrose Burnside, who was commander of Union forces during a brief period in the Civil War.

Burnside is best known for the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. His command decisions during that battle have become legendary for a combination of poor judgment and pit-bull stubbornness. Burnside ordered wave after wave of Union troops to mount frontal assaults uphill across an open field against confederate infantry and cannons entrenched on the bluffs above the Virginia town. The result was an appalling slaughter that left nearly 13,000 Northern soldiers dead.

And it was not as though he wasn't warned. Several of his division commanders were openly skeptical of the strategy even before the first attempt. And with each failure, they urged Burnside to retreat and attempt to engage Robert E. Lee's Confederate army at another location at another time. Day after bloody day, the commanding general rejected their advice.

There certainly seemed to be an echo of General Burnside's frustrating stubbornness in President Calderon's annual state-of-the-nation address in September 2010. "I am well aware that over the past year, violence has worsened," he told his audience.^[9] "But we must battle on."

A wise leader recognizes when his strategy is not working and chooses to make the necessary adjustments. Let's hope that President Calderon makes a much-overdo course correction during his final months in office, before he causes even more grief to his troubled country—and perpetuates a worsening security situation for the United States on its southern border.

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