

Chicago Tribune

El Chapo got caught. So what?

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January 13, 2016

All across America last weekend, panicked drug users rushed to their dealers to stock up on marijuana, heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine for fear of running out. The arrest of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, head of the biggest drug cartel in Mexico, was sure to cause a sudden shortage of illegal substances in this country.

That's right. And I'm Queen Latifah. In reality, the capture of the narcotics kingpin is likely to have about as much impact on drug supplies as Martian solar storms do. You wouldn't expect long lines at the gas pump if the CEO of Exxon Mobil were suddenly unavailable, because the company, its retailers and its suppliers would go on functioning.

The same holds for the Sinaloa drug operation. It no doubt has a succession plan — Guzman was in prison for more than a year before he made a notorious escape last year — and plenty of experience in dealing with the loss of key managers to murder and other unwanted events. Not many people in the drug trade last long enough to collect a gold watch.

The cartel's vast network of growers, smugglers and retail sellers will continue their operations largely unimpeded. "I have a fleet of submarines, airplanes, trucks and boats," Guzman told actor Sean Penn shortly before being caught, and they are not going to be parked for the duration.

A bad man who has allegedly killed thousands of people in the course of business is now in custody, where his opportunities for murder will be far more limited. But anyone who expects this welcome development to mark a turning point in the war on drugs has to be smoking something. Fighting this trade is like mowing dandelions. It makes the lawn look better for the moment, but they grow back and keep spreading.

The current issue of The Atlantic has a sobering article by David Epstein, published before Guzman's arrest, on how, in 2005, the Drug Enforcement Administration managed to capture Javier Arellano, who ran another Mexican drug cartel, the Arellano Felix Organization.

"Javier's arrest would be hailed by officials in the (United) States as a decisive victory in what may have been the longest active case in the DEA's history — a rare triumph in the War on Drugs," he writes. "'We feel like we've taken the head off the snake,' the agency's chief of operations announced."

But there were plenty more serpents under that rock. "Far from stopping the flow of drugs, taking out the AFO only cleared territory for" (where have I heard this name before?) "Joaquin Guzman Loera — aka 'El Chapo' — and his now nearly unstoppable Sinaloa cartel," Epstein reports. "One agent who spent years on the case told me, 'There are more drugs coming across the border than ever.'"

The supply of drugs in the United States is not likely to change because Guzman was caught. The volume of bloodshed in Mexico, however, may — and not for the better. Anything that disrupts the operations of one cartel creates an opportunity for others to snatch some of its business — a process that often involves killing rivals in the sadistic ways that distinguish Mexican drug traffickers.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute and author of "The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America," tells me, "It could lead to greater disorder and an upsurge of violence after a few years of relative stability."

If we truly want to hurt the major drug traffickers, there is a simple way: Legalize the use, sale and production of marijuana. A large share of their revenue comes from cannabis, and the United States is their biggest market. The legalization of recreational weed in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Alaska and the District of Columbia, Carpenter says, "has already put a dent in the revenue flows of the Mexican cartels."

California, which already allows marijuana for medical purposes, is expected to have a ballot initiative in November to legalize it for mere pleasure. If it were to be approved, Carpenter says, the effect on the drug cartels "would be the equivalent of sinking the Titanic." Who would buy illegal pot from El Chapo if they could buy the legal stuff from a reputable American company — or grow it themselves without fear of going to jail?

El Chapo is someone the Sinaloa cartel can replace. American consumers? Losing them could be fatal.