



Felipe Calderón Has No Regrets About His Bloody War Against Mexico's Cartels

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As president of Mexico from 2006 to 2012, Felipe Calderón presided over one of the bloodiest eras in his country's history. The year he took office, there was one drug-related homicide every four hours. By 2011, there was one every 30 minutes.

Calderón's critics say his decision to deploy the military against the drug cartels led to the massive increase in killings. But as Calderón told VICE News in a recent interview for our podcast "Chapo: Kingpin on Trial," he has no regrets about the way he decided to fight the drug war. If he could do it all over again, he wouldn't change a thing.

Whether Calderón is solely responsible for the bloodshed that engulfed Mexico during his six years as president depends on who you ask. Calderón himself points to research that suggests violence was already on the rise by the time he was elected. He says rampant corruption in state and local governments undermined his strategy. And he offers data that suggests murders were actually falling in some key cities by the time he left office.

But other data paints a grim picture. Throughout the Calderón administration, according to research from the University of San Diego, no other country in the Western Hemisphere experienced an increase in homicide rate or absolute number of homicides as large as Mexico's. The violence only continued to climb under his successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, and Mexico's murder rate is currently the highest its been since the early 1990s.

There are many theories about what exactly plunged Mexico into the abyss. Some blame the 2004 repeal of the assault weapons ban in the United States, which supplied the cartels with military-grade firepower. Others believe a crackdown on cartels in Colombia made competition for cocaine in Mexico more intense, triggering the turf wars that erupted under Calderón. But the most common belief is that the so-called "Kingpin Strategy," where authorities target the leaders of criminal organizations, is the primary cause.

During the Calderón era, 25 of the 37 "most wanted" Mexican drug lords were either captured or killed. Those in favor of this approach argue it can bring swift justice. Calderón said it was a way of restoring the "rule of law" in Mexico. But it also has also bred chaos. As cartels splinter following the death or arrest of their leaders, they fight among each other. Rival groups seize on opportunities to claim territory. Research from the CATO Institute found that capturing a cartel leader in a municipality increases its homicide rate by 80 percent.

Calderón points out that his administration went after entire organizations — such as Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacána — not just the leaders. But the Sinaloa cartel survived his reign suspiciously intact. It wasn't until after he left office that El Chapo was captured and extradited to the U.S. And now that El Chapo is on trial, in Brooklyn, the kingpin's lawyers have claimed that both Calderón and Peña Nieto accepted “hundreds of millions” in bribes. On Tuesday, a key witness, the younger brother of Sinaloa Cartel leader El Mayo Zambada, testified that Calderón's minister of public security accepted millions in bribes.

We interviewed Calderón at his office in Mexico City in June, several months before the El Chapo trial started, so we weren't able to ask him directly about the corruption allegations. (He recently issued a statement on Twitter calling the claims by El Chapo's defense “absolutely false and reckless.”) But we did get to speak about the Kingpin Strategy, his responsibility for the violence in Mexico, and the claim that he favored the Sinaloa cartel.

The following transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

VICE News: We're obviously here at a time when the country is on the verge of a big change. The leading candidate in the presidential election, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, has talked about taking the country in a different direction than it has gone in the past, particularly in regard to his policies on drugs and drug cartels. Where do you see that going with him if he is indeed the next president of Mexico?

Felipe Calderón: What is happening in Mexico is far beyond drugs and fighting drugs or drug cartels. What we have in Mexico, it's a terrible lack of rule of law. There is no enforcement in several parts of the country. There is no commitment [to enforcing the law] from several governors, mayors, law enforcement agents, and some presidents.

And in my perspective, not one candidate, or at least not the leading candidates, are addressing these issues in the right manner... The perception of Lopez Obrador is exactly following this mistake, this misperception of the problem. Because, if he assumes that the whole problem is fighting drug cartels, drug leaders, he decides and is promising to declare some kind of amnesty on them, which is an incredible mistake, because what is going to happen is that's going to exacerbate the problem, not fix it.

Why was one of your first moves as president to deploy the military to your home state of Michoacán. Why was the military approach the first step in your mind?

Once I was elected, I received a request — a personal, an informal, and afterwards a formal request, from the governor in Michoacán, Lázaro Cárdenas. So he requested that support and he explained to me a lot of things that honestly I didn't know. For instance, that he was unable to control the criminals in the state because criminals were in control of his own police force. And the number of people the criminals at that time, La Familia Michoacána, were able to manage was by far much bigger than any local police force in the state.

Quite importantly, he requested formally several times to [previous president] Vicente Fox, the support of the army to face the problem in Michoacán, and Fox denied the support. And actually my first reaction was, ‘Well, let me see what [action] needs to be taken.’ There was at the time some criminals in jail in Michoacán, and they were receiving the support of some very young lawyers, the public defenders for them.... [They] kidnapped these boys inside the prison,

requesting a set of demands to the government. And finally, they decapitated the lawyers, their own defenders.

So Lázaro told me, 'Well, I cannot stand this anymore.' So we analyzed, we made a very important effort of intelligence coming from all the sources of that time. Basically, the army — particularly the army zone in Michoacán — the navy, the CISEN, the intelligence agents, the information the government of Michoacán was providing me was quite important, very fruitful. So we started a massive operation to take control. And actually we did it. We got very good results at the beginning.

But this quickly expanded to other parts of the country, to Tijuana, to the northeast, and then at the same time you were seeing violence go up significantly. Did you know that might be a risk when you started this? And would you do anything differently if you could go back and do it over again?

Well, first, that didn't begin when I took office. It started much before.

Well, certainly there's always been violence...

No, no, no — but the point is that the battle between groups and the violence it started before... Actually if you analyze the rates of homicides in Tijuana starting before, and actually the first operation made by militaries in that sense was made by Vicente Fox. The name was Mexico Seguro and it was in 2004. And the first operation in the northeast was made by Vicente Fox in 2004. So the problems started before.

Honestly, I think nobody expected that the violence could reach those levels. However, I insist, I'm absolutely clear that violence started because of the fight to control territory between the organized crime groups, between the cartels, not because of the action of the government. It's quite difficult to talk about hypothetically, to make the case hypothetically, but I'm quite sure that with or without the federal intervention, that violence, it was going to skyrocket. Definitely.

To be clear, you think the violence would have been equal or equivalent even without military operations that your administration conducted?

Yes. That is a phenomenon that doesn't relate to the federal intervention. It relates to the conflict for control of the territory by the criminals. That will happen with or without federal intervention.

Actually, the process we started in order to face them, to rebuild institutions, to rebuild the social fabric, was able to deter increasing levels of that, and we were able to reduce the violence in general in the country.

So we reduced the homicide rate in Tijuana from probably 75 percent from its peak. In Juarez, what is the worst case ever, again, 72 percent from its peak, and in Monterrey. That's two, three cases of success of the strategy.

So in other words, the peak of violence in Mexico will happen because of the conflict, the dispute for the territory between the criminals — regardless of the intervention of the government.

What role did your relationship with the U.S. government, the George W. Bush administration, and the DEA play in your decisions to conduct these operations and how they were carried out in terms of setting priorities for targets?

It was important to know if the Americans were going to support us or not, beyond talking. And what I received from President Bush first, and afterwards from President Obama, was full support in diplomatic terms. Not too much in economic terms, honestly.

But it implies a different perspective in the bilateral relationship. Instead of the traditional finger-pointing American strategy, we started a new era of co-responsibility on that. It was so important, for the first time ever, probably, the intelligence agencies in the United States, people inside them started to rely completely on Mexican agents. And that explains a very important part of the success of a lot of operations.

Actually, we created a special agency with Mexican Marines. The Mexican Marines were able to vet the American agents the DEA or FBI or whoever, and American agencies were able to vet to Mexican Marines, so they were working back to back with incredible success. That unity that we created was able to chase and capture most of the most serious leaders of organized crime, from Arturo Beltrán to Z40. Actually, they were able to capture twice El Chapo, those special agents. That's the reason it was so important [to have] bilateral cooperation. Before that, and even today probably, there is not mutual trust and confidence.

You talk about the success in capturing these kingpins. And certainly many of the big names — most of the big names — Arturo Beltrán, the Zetas leaders, were killed or captured. But what was left after that was fractured organizations, people fighting to take control of what was left behind, and the drugs are still apparently flowing like they were before. Do you still believe in that strategy of targeting the leadership of organizations?

Another common mistake is that we operated only in capturing the heads. We were working across the board and we were able to put in jail thousands of people at any level. What is important is, again, it is not about drugs. It's about recovering control of the state, recovering the capability to protect the citizens. So you need to do this.

Suppose there is a very powerful criminal organization in the city. Instead of the old traditional policy [of] just let them do whatever they want, look for the other side and maybe try to reach an agreement with them — it's a stupid thing. Just to go for them, capture the leaders and capture the second or third levels. And recover the strength of the local police, or at least the federal police for a time in order to protect the families. That's the name of the game: recover the state, be able to enforce the law, be able to prosecute any criminal there.

Of course there will be some rearrangements or instability or whatever, but the end of the game is exactly when you take over completely or recover completely the control for the citizens. And that game didn't end. I am very sure that if this strategy should be continued, Mexico would be completely different right now.

Knowing what you know now, looking back at history a few years removed from your administration, would you change anything? Do you have any regrets about how your anti-drug operations were conducted?

First, it's not an anti-drug policy. It's a policy to enforce the law and the Mexican rule of law.

Second, I think it's different to have regrets than to do different things. Because when you are in office, your duty is to make decisions in an environment of uncertainty and lack of information. And the most important lack of information is you cannot see the future. No one can do that.

So we've talked a lot about going after the leaders of these organizations and the members under them, and also ridding the government of corruption at the high levels, but there's also this problem of drug money. It kind of permeates Mexico's economy — construction, banking, you name it, there's probably some narco money flowing through it. How do you get at those deep roots, the deepest roots of the drug problem? There are a lot of jobs, a lot of people are living off the drug trade.

Well, let me start with that. That's a myth. Because there are much more jobs in a city in which the law is respected, which allows much more investment, much better-paid jobs than in a city which is abandoned to the criminals, and you can get actually a not very good salary with them and run a very high risk.

But what about the rural towns?

Honestly, look at what is happening in the Tierra Caliente in Michoacán and Guerrero. There is no law. No authority. No one is investing. There are jobs, yes, but honestly it's a myth. It's a false debate. Whatever they can create, we are losing much more jobs and investment and economic growth.

If this drug economy was able to be taken back and tamped down, you're arguing that there would be a replacement for that?

Of course, completely, much more jobs in a formal, secure economy than in this one and those areas. Look at this. Mexico is creating right now almost 1 million formal jobs a year. It's an incredible country, and it could create much more if you are able to invest in an avocado ranch in Michoacan or Guerrero, where the best avocados are grown. But look at what has happened, where you have over your neck, one guy asking for money month after month and threatening to kidnap your daughter or whatever. Come on.

Let me get back to your question. We detected that the banking system in Mexico was receiving roughly \$17 billion a year coming from unknown sources. That implies an estimation of the formal investment of organized crime in the banking system. We created a mechanism — actually my party lost a vote because we established a set of mechanisms that established several rules that you cannot pay for things with cash... no houses, no cars by cash. Everything with check or electronic transfer. So we were able to reduce that inexplicable money in the banking system.

I demanded to the Americans to President Bush and President Obama publicly in the Congress, in the United Nations: Stop. We request two favors, which actually are not two favors but two moral duties of you: Stop the flow of money and stop the flow of weapons. I don't care how you stop the flow of money. We have 30 years that you are saying that you are going to reduce consumption. That is not happening.

I don't care if you want to preserve the consumption [of drugs] or to increase it — it's not my problem' it's yours. I don't care if you want to reinforce your own agencies in order to stop the flow of money. You can do it. You have the money to do that. Or I don't care if you establish a

market mechanism to stop the flow of money. It is your moral duty to stop the flow of money and to stop the flow of weapons, so that's a request.

The American government, Congress, and society honestly did not do anything to stop the flow of money, to stop the flow of weapons. Actually, the paradox is we seize like 106,000 guns and weapons, and 90 percent of them were sold legally in the United States.

There was reporting during your administration from [investigative journalist] Anabel Hernandez, for example, who has claimed that you sent a general to negotiate with the leaders of organizations to reduce the violence.

She's a liar. Big liar. One of the biggest liars in Mexico is Anabel Hernandez. Definitely.

There was also an analysis from NPR that found that fewer members of the Sinaloa cartel were arrested under your administration compared to rival groups. How do you account for that disparity?

Now we've fought against all the cartels. We established a clear rule of no agreements with anyone — [that was] completely forbidden in my administration.

What Anabel said, it's completely a lie. She has no proof at all about that. The only instance, she quoted [Beltrán-Leyva cartel member Edgar Valdez Villarreal] La Barbie. He said that. Well, we captured La Barbie. There is no sense to say that. No. Absolutely no. This is not true. It's completely false.

What does it say, that there was an agreement?

An attempted agreement.

This is a stupid thing. Completely. She's a big liar. And I can demonstrate it's a big lie. No serious journalists — the lack of serious journalism in Mexico is another problem and an explanation of why we are unable to fix the problem in Mexico. Because once one lie is created, it's expanded by political reasons. It's politically correct to follow Anabel Hernandez.

That's why we're here, to ask you about it directly.

What was your other question about?

The Sinaloa cartel remained relatively intact compared to other cartels in Mexico.

Honestly, no. It is not intact. The main leader was captured, which is El Chapo, which is for your program. And he was captured because of a chase effort we started in a very serious manner. It was a successful one. We captured in my time Vicentillo Zambada (the son of Sinaloa cartel leader El Mayo Zambada) and the brother of El Mayo Zambada, El Rey Zambada. We captured, or he died in his capture, Ignacio Coronel. We captured the Beltran-Leyvas, which at that time was part of the El Chapo [organization]. Arturo [Beltrán-Leyva] died in Cuernavaca. The brother, [Alfredo Beltrán-Leyva] El Mochomo [was also captured].

You talked about how important establishing the rule of law is in Mexico. Do you support sending El Chapo to face justice in the United States, or would it have been important for him to be tried and imprisoned here, to show that Mexico is capable of that?

Well, I have been the president who extradited the most number of people to the United States, ever. Honestly, it's a very pragmatic thing. There were moments in which we had no capability to even keep all of them under control in prisons.

By the way, during my administration there was not one single escape from prison. Not one. And afterward we established in the high-security prison El Altiplano, a lot of devices microphones, cameras, detectors of sounds, movements, vibrations, all kind of stuff was established there. I don't know what happened the day he escaped. It was impossible if all those devices were in place and working at that time, honestly.

The day the news broke that El Chapo escaped, what went through your mind?

It was impossible to escape. You know if you use a hammer to put out single nail in your wall at 2 o'clock in the morning, your neighbor will call the police, knock on your door, say ugly things about you. Come on. To open a hole in the reinforced concrete. It can be heard kilometers away. Because all of those devices were controlled not at the jail only but also at CISEN, the intelligence agency offices.

Is there a tiny bit of you that's impressed? That's insane.

It's insane, but honestly I didn't understand why the government — well, I did understand — but I didn't understand why the government didn't extradite him immediately. I didn't understand that. Well, I had at the time my hypothesis. But honestly I was angry the day he escaped. Angry. Completely angry, because I knew about all those devices.

So now that El Chapo Guzmán is in the United States, he's going on trial, and in all likelihood he will spend the rest of his life in a maximum security American prison. What changes as a result of that? And why does it matter that that is happening? Does anything change in Mexico because Chapo Guzmán is going to be locked away forever?

Unfortunately, not substantial. Why? Because this needs to be a comprehensive effort. As you were saying, you cannot capture a leader if you are not following the whole chain of criminality in that organization. You cannot chase, find, and finally capture or neutralize members of organized crime if you are not building law enforcement agencies and institutions. And that strategy was almost abandoned.

So there is no sense to defeat, as we defeated in several places, the organized crime if you are unable to substitute the corrupt law enforcement agencies with new policemen. Such young people who believe in Mexico. People who not only are earning much better salaries but also believe they're building, honestly, a new and better country for the children. If you are unable to do that, there is no sense. And at the same time you are not.

And let me anticipate a question you didn't ask. I agree with the discussion of legalizing drugs. Not only marijuana. That's peanuts. Any kind of drugs. It's your own responsibility to take care of your own children. However, with or without legalization, that is not the key issue about security in Mexico or Latin America.

You have a lot of countries with a regime of prohibition, and they are countries with full rule of law. Countries without criminality. Even the United States, no? What are the reasons why Europe, most of the countries, are able to reduce or to have such low levels of criminality and violence, even though they have drug consumption? Because they have authority, they have a

rule of law. So the difference is not the law regime of drugs, no? Because there is some kind of myth that by just legalizing that you fix it up. Yes, you can reduce a lot of economic sources of the black markets, but you don't fix the problem, and actually you can do worse. The problem is you don't recover the state from the criminals. That's the key issue.

So Chapo Guzmán is just one person, legalization is just one potential solution, but it sounds like you think this is an economic problem and a corruption problem and a rule of law problem.

To be clear, the capture of El Chapo Guzmán was a great achievement. Definitely. I applaud that. Second, it doesn't solve the problem if you don't put in place a comprehensive strategy, which implies to have three big axes: Fight the criminals with full force of the state. Rebuild law enforcement agencies and rebuild the social fabric through social opportunities and education health services and so on.

But the key issue of this solution of violence and criminality, crime in Mexico and a lot of countries in Latin America, is building a state that's able to enforce law. A rule of law state. That should be the main priority for any government or any president, and actually it was my own priority. If there is one thing about I regret, it is that I didn't complete that mission. I can blame it could be my own failures. It could be the lack of time, it could be the lack of cooperation, it could be that I was a president in a minority and there was a lot of governors that they just didn't want to do it. A lot of mayors they just just didn't want to do it. They were either, some of them were even linked with criminals but most of them knew they were fearing or taking care about their own lives.

If there is one thing I regret, it is probably that I was unable to complete the mission. But I'm absolutely sure we were on the right track.