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## Cato Unbound – the War on Drugs in Mexico

Cato Unbound has another [excellent discussion series](#) on the war on drugs, this time focusing on Mexico, though naturally, the discussion ends up coming back to the U.S. time and time again as it must.

The lead essay — [A U.S. War with Mexican Consequences](#) — is by Jorge Castañeda, who was the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 2000-2003. He starts moving the discussion in an interesting direction.

If current trends toward medical decriminalization continue, if the Webb Commission in the Senate concludes that some changes in U.S. drug laws are necessary and desirable, and if the Obama administration pursues a de facto harm reduction approach without explicitly stating it, there may be a way for Mexico to extricate itself from its current, tragic predicament. Otherwise, though, there does not seem to be any accessible, affordable, and acceptable exit strategy from the current war. And Mexico will continue to pay an exorbitant cost for having plunged, with U.S. support and encouragement, into a war with no ostensible victory in sight. [...]

As long as criminalization, its hypocrisy, and serious discussions of the alternatives are banned from public discussion, U.S. drug policy will remain what it has been for the past forty years: a supply-side, foreign-policy, nickel-and-dime war waged beyond U.S. borders. In the case of Mexico, for a series of specific reasons, that policy, as well as domestic Mexican political considerations, have led to a war that cannot be won and should not be waged. [...]

There is no optimum solution to this conundrum. But the only conceivable alternative lies in a change in U.S. drug policy: not demand reduction, or supply interdiction, but decriminalization, harm reduction, adjusting laws to reality instead of uselessly attempting the opposite, and understanding that the last thing the United States needs is a fire next door.



Then, as usual with Cato Unbound, there are a series of responses and then a discussion. The others involved are Stephanie Hanson of the Council on Foreign Relations, Jim Roberts of the Heritage Foundation, and Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute. Here are links to those pieces that are up so far.

### Responses

- [Making "Hamsterdam" an Option](#) by [Stephanie Hanson](#)
- [The United States Must Help Mexico Defeat Narco-Insurgencies](#) by [James Roberts](#)
- [Only a Drastic Change in U.S. Drug Policy Will Ease the Carnage in Mexico](#) by [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

### The Conversation

- [Evaluating Plan Colombia](#) by [Stephanie Hanson](#)
- [A Response to Roberts, Carpenter, and Hanson](#) by [Jorge Castañeda](#)
- [On Decriminalization](#) by [Stephanie Hanson](#)
- [Don't Fence Us Into Your Brave New World!](#) by [James Roberts](#)
- [The Eroding Support for the Drug War](#) by [Jorge Castañeda](#)

Stephanie Hanson goes a very interesting direction in her response: [Making "Hamsterdam" an Option](#)

In season three of *The Wire*, the HBO series on drugs and politics in Baltimore, Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin finds a way to decrease crime in his district and "clean up the corners." His solution? A "free zone" of abandoned rowhouses where he tells neighborhood drug dealers they can peddle their wares without consequences, as long as there's no violence. The dealers move in to what quickly becomes known as "Hamsterdam," crime drops in the district, and Colvin allows public health researchers into his social experiment to work with drug users. [...]

Ending the grip of the drug cartels and the corruption they've bred throughout Mexican institutions like the police and the judiciary will take drastic measures. Curtailing supply has been a resounding failure; we must turn to controlling demand. The United States should decriminalize the possession of small amounts of drugs, and it should seriously consider legalization, particularly for marijuana. This legislation should simultaneously up funding for government treatment and prevention programs. Creating a nationwide version of Hamsterdam would not come without risks. But like Major Colvin, who tried everything to curb crime in his district over his decades as a Baltimore policeman, we don't have any appealing alternatives.

She's on the right track, but seems unable to imagine what true legalization means, or would look like. The notion of a "Hamsterdam," while perhaps not beautiful and not "without risks," is vastly superior to the status quo, yet it is still a make-shift aberration, flying under the radar of prohibition. Decriminalization, or better yet legalization, can result in a much more attractive model than tolerated criminal drug dealers in row houses. Stephanie need not worry about the drawbacks of a "Hamsterdam" when most of those would disappear in a legal, regulated environment.

Ted Galen Carpenter steps up to the plate and goes to the place where Jorge and Stephanie seemed too tentative to reach: [Only a Drastic Change in U.S. Drug Policy Will Ease the Carnage in Mexico](#).

Governments around the world finally seem to be awakening to the problems caused by a prohibition strategy. Countries such as the Netherlands and Portugal have adopted decriminalization policies for possession and use of small quantities of drugs. Sentiment for similar liberalization seems to be growing in the Western Hemisphere as well.

But such reforms, while desirable, do not get to the causal root of the violence that accompanies the drug trade. Unless the production and sale of drugs is also legalized, the black-market premium will still exist and law-abiding businesses will still avoid the trade. In other words, drug commerce will remain in the hands of criminal elements that do not shrink from bribery, intimidation, and murder. [...]

Abandoning the prohibition model is the most effective way to stem the violence in Mexico and its spillover into the United States. Other proposed solutions, including preventing the flow of guns from the U.S. to Mexico, establishing tighter control over the border, and (somehow) winning the war on drugs are utterly unworkable. Ending drug prohibition would de-fund the criminal trafficking organizations while enabling honest enterprises to enter the business and be content with normal profit margins. The alternative is to risk Mexico becoming a chaotic narco-state, with all the alarming implications that that development would have for America's own security.



It probably would be a good discussion, with some fascinating differences, just with Casteñada, Hanson, and Carpenter. But, unfortunately, joining in is James Roberts, the Research Fellow in Freedom and Growth at The Heritage Foundation's Center for International Trade and Economics.

You immediately get an idea of how quickly Roberts is willing to dump any intellectual rigor (and his entire economics training) and go straight to his moralistic outrage over drug use (which thus makes him unable to distinguish between drug war harms and drug use).

Professor Castañeda even finds a way to blame the current drug problem on Richard Nixon in 1969! Perhaps he forgets that was the watershed year when Baby Boomers virtually invented Nixon's "Silent Majority," who were alarmed as their children began toking up with "Proud Mary" from Mexico, rebelled against 200 years of the American Protestant Work Ethic, and trudged through the muddy fields of the socialist Woodstock Nation.

That's right. Blame the socialist hippy druggies. What Casteñada was referring to was the ramping up of the drug war and its collateral damage. All Roberts can think of is who was using (some) drugs. And so naturally, the only option is more prohibition.

Instead of succumbing to the siren call of legalization from Professor Castañeda and others, President Obama must ramp up U.S. support for President Calderón's fight against the cartels. [...]

Take a Stand for Truth, Justice, and the Mexican Way [...]

Jorge Castañeda should oppose the wealthy and powerful forces that would enslave millions in lives lost to drug addiction and violence. [...]

Don't support the legal sanctioning of these physically and morally destructive drugs. [...]

Stand against the dark forces, professor, and prevail!



Give me a break. He's actually invoking public policy via comic book? That says a lot. His world view is the good vs bad superheroes and supervillains universe of his own fantasy.

In his follow-up, he really starts unloading with his moral views on drug use...

Unfortunately, in the real world legalization of drugs would be ugly and messy.

Instead [of] focusing on the supposed futility of taking any action to protect ourselves, our children, and our nations from the predators that would destroy us from within with these debilitating and addictive psychotropic substances, I would encourage my colleagues to confront the real issue — the taking of the drugs themselves and what that has done and will do to our society and our culture. If this were a case of chemical and biological warfare being actively waged against the American and Mexican people, they would pay more attention. And that is what it is.

He equates (some) drug use with biological and chemical war and, in his world, that means he doesn't have to address whether

1. The drug war does any good.
2. The drug war does any harm.

Apparently, if my neighbor on one side sits at home relaxing and enjoying a Corona, that's all-American. But if my neighbor on the other side sits at home relaxing and enjoying some Acapulco Gold, he's involved in biological warfare.

Now, the next part is where Roberts really goes cuckoo, and for this paragraph alone, Yale should repossess his master's degree in economics.

Numerous studies have totaled up some of the costs to taxpayers and consumers from the current problems with drug addiction. These burdens on society — estimated at more than \$180 billion a year — affect everyone. Just the economic costs of heroin addiction and methamphetamine abuse alone run into the tens of millions annually in the United States for health care, lost productivity, law enforcement, and welfare. These costs would not shrink — they would swell with any moves towards legalization — and gobble up any tax revenue windfalls produced by it along the way.

Catch that? He is including the costs of prohibition as part of the equation as to why legalization is not economically feasible.

Let me repeat that. *He is including the costs of prohibition as part of the equation as to why legalization is not economically feasible.*

If you legalize drugs, you dramatically reduce most of the costs that are currently figured in those bizarre (and poorly calculated) estimates — law enforcement, prison, courts, and many more. Yes, even health costs.

Does anybody realize what kind of denial of reality has to be going on in order for him to do that? (Or perhaps it's just outright lying.)

This is like saying:

*We can't fix the hole in the roof. Don't you know how much we have to spend each year fixing water damage from the rain coming in that hole? If we fixed the hole, we'd have all those costs plus the cost of fixing the hole.*

*We'd better just continue shooting bullets at the clouds to stop the rain.*

No, you idiot. If you fix the hole in the roof, you'll no longer have that leak or the costs from the damage of the leak.

But Roberts isn't interested in the real world. He's living in a fantasy world where "morality" means justifying the deaths of thousands of innocents, and where "liberty" means prison.

In his excellent book examining how traditional Christian-Judeo values established the ideal moral foundation for the great American experiment in republican self-government, Michael Novak notes that the Founders were well aware that a successful democracy depends upon a collectively virtuous citizenry, continuously informed and inspired by those values, to create and maintain the conditions of liberty in which each individual citizen desires to live. Without this foundation of virtue there can be no real liberty or freedom, and it is liberty which was (and remains) the chief goal of the American Republic.

So if you don't believe in our version of liberty, we're going to lock you up, because we're virtuous (how do we know? because we say so).

The Founders knew that the pursuit of materialistic pleasures — through drug taking, alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and in countless other ways — undermines virtue and leads to moral weakness...

Catch that? "drug taking, alcohol abuse"

It's OK to use alcohol, just not to abuse it. On the other hand, drug *taking* is immoral regardless of abuse. Some drugs.

Says who?

Seriously. Says who?



August 22nd, 2009 by Pete | [Permalink](#)

## 8 comments to Cato Unbound – the War on Drugs in Mexico



[BruceM](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 1:55 am

The US will be gone in the next 2 years. Then the world will be free to abandon the puritanical, hypocritical drug prohibitions the US has forced upon them with a gun pointed at their heads.

Within 24 hours of the collapse of the US, Mexico will be the first to end all drug prohibition.

The only question is whether the remaining American states, with no federal government, will continue drug prohibition. The states all have their own drug laws, and those will need to be repealed. Some states like California will be so utterly bankrupt that they'll have no choice, and their own state governments may very well collapse just like the federal government. Other states, like Texas, may continue drug prohibition because they simply don't know anything else, and after half a century of federal drug propaganda, it will take a while for them to see the error of their ways, if they ever can.



[ezrydn](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 7:50 am

Another piece of fluff froj someone who down't live down here. What hog wash! jump in the fryin pan and then report! I did! It's gets sickening to hear the Ivory Topwner Americans reporters spewing their diatribe about what they have no clue of. Personally, I'm waiting for the Reapors and Preditors to be flying.



[Chris](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 8:11 am

Great read.



[Nick Zentor](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 9:55 am

This looks like a score for the reformists and anti-prohibitionists. The prohibitionist Roberts does a poor job defending his fear-mongering party-propaganda while the others make much better common sense, stating the facts as most of us know them. More and more voices supporting decriminalization and an end to prohibition with all the facts to back them up may eventually prove that the truth still has the power to prevail.



[hANOVER fIST](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 11:03 am

The hole-in-the-roof analogy is apt, because that tool has a hole in the head that cannot be fixed.



[Voletear](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 1:17 pm

Roberts is way out there. Articles: [Link](#). Unfortunately, Obama is following the Roberts' path. The recent moves against Bolivia are a sad example. If he opens an agreement with Peru ala' Merida and Plan Colombia (per Roberts) we will have all the indication we need that he is a dangerous prohibitionist adventurer.



[Buc](#)

August 23rd, 2009 at 7:53 pm

James Roberts is the stereotypical modern conservative. It's why I no longer consider myself of that ilk, but rather a libertarian.

Fiscal conservatism gets put on the backburner in favor of the never ending need to control the behavior and morals of others via any means necessary. Just look at the 2008 GOP presidential candidates. Besides Ron Paul, they were all authoritarian with regards to social issues. Dr. Paul, the most fiscally conservative of the group by miles, was ironically called a liberal by some of them.

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paul  
August 23rd, 2009 at 8:59 pm

Buc:

You bet. And the Democrats are just as bad. The only difference is that they are doing it for your own good, even if you aren't smart enough to see that. A pox on both their houses.

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