

FOREIGN AFFAIRS



The Fire Next Door; The Drug War in Mexico

By: Richard Feinberg - March/April 2013

Carpenter bases his sharp criticism of current U.S. counternarcotics policies not on libertarian principles relating to consumer choice (as one might anticipate from a senior fellow at the Cato Institute) but rather on pragmatic grounds: four decades of the “war on drugs,” as Carpenter demonstrates, have clearly failed to stem the drug trade, while horrendous collateral damage continues to mount. The United States’ get-tough, penalty-based law enforcement approach fails for the obvious reason that repressing the market for drugs only raises prices and profits for criminal cartels. Carpenter rejects the hysteria that often accompanies this topic. Although worried by recent trends, he is not persuaded that Mexico is a “failed state” or that there has been a significant spillover of drug-related violence from Mexico into the United States. Unwaveringly clear-eyed, Carpenter dismisses “bogus solutions,” such as programs to reduce the demand for drugs in the United States, efforts to stem arms trafficking to Mexico, or plans to seal the border, as not realistic or beside the point. He wants the U.S. government to deprive the cartels of revenue by legalizing the manufacture, sale, and possession of illegal drugs, steps that would conserve law enforcement resources and also generate significant revenue for the government.

Shirk’s report shares many of Carpenter’s critical assessments, although his policy recommendations are not quite as bold. As Shirk puts it, “Over the last four decades, the war on drugs has lacked clear, consistent, or achievable objectives; has had little effect on aggregate demand; and has imposed an enormous social and economic cost.” He agrees with Carpenter that the United States could do much more to bolster the dysfunctional Mexican judicial system and combat the recruitment efforts of drug cartels by fostering alternative opportunities through development assistance for at-risk Mexican regions. Shirk is more inclined to try to reduce arms smuggling and illicit drug consumption and to seek more effective interdiction methods. But he, too, advocates a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, urging the federal government to allow states to experiment with alternative approaches to reducing the harm caused by drugs, including by fully legalizing marijuana. In Shirk’s view, the primary metric of policy success should shift from the amount of drugs seized to reductions in the level of drug-related violence.