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The United States must help Mexico defeat narco-insurgencies

by James Roberts

Editor's note: This piece, and the accompanying responses, first appeared in the Cato Institute's "Cato Unbound" series. [Click here](#).

With some [artful sleight-of-hand](#), Professor Castañeda paints the United States into a corner politically and, as the elites in Mexico have done all too often in the past, points the finger of blame for Mexico's drug-related violence squarely at the Yankees. He leaves open only the "easy" way out: legalization of psychotropic drugs in the United States. If we don't, the professor warns, we will face "the fire next door." Decriminalization or bust, so to speak. I beg to differ.

In fact, of all the potential solutions that Dr. Castañeda sets up and then knocks down, the decriminalization option is the least realistic politically and has the lowest probability of actually happening. Because notwithstanding the mixed signals the Obama Administration has sent about it since taking power, the American people know that legalization would be a disaster.

Mexican Elites — Part of the Problem

Unfortunately former Foreign Minister Castañeda and others in the elites have tended to blame Mexico's domestic problems on the United States and then demand that the Americans fix them. When the "Mexican Miracle" fizzled out in the late 1970s, the elites should have reformed their outdated political and economic institutions. Instead, they [exported their problem to the United States](#) by encouraging massive out-migration and reaped a hard-currency windfall in remittances.

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.

The Heritage Foundation's [Index of Economic Freedom](#) details pervasive corruption and weak rule of law stunting economic growth and job creation in Mexico. A recent Transparency International report found that many political leaders are neck-deep in drug-related corruption and concludes that this stain upon the country's honor cannot be seriously addressed until the elites reform themselves. President Calderón has been courageous in showing them the way.

Americans Will Never Permit the Legalization of Drugs

Dr. Castañeda's facile assumption that the Yankees will come to Mexico's rescue yet again by decriminalizing drugs, thereby putting the cartels out of business, minimizes the obstacles. Exactly how will U.S. politicians sell their constituents on this fundamental change — one that goes directly against the grain of [American exceptionalism](#)? As Clinton-era Drug Czar and retired General Barry McCaffrey stated emphatically in a [talk at Heritage](#), decriminalization will never happen in the United States because the American people will oppose the legal sale of substances that can destroy healthy bodies and so easily degrade the human spirit while increasing crime.

Six months ago budget-busting nationalized Obamacare and ruinously expensive, non-transparent “Cap-and-Trade” legislation looked like sure bets to sail through the U.S. Congress. Not anymore. Decriminalization won’t, either, because the American people know that [legalization in places like crime-infested Amsterdam](#) has failed just as miserably as has the fiscally [unsustainable European social welfare](#) model.

Decriminalization Would Create New Problems and Not Solve the Old Ones

The Heritage Foundation’s Cully Stimson enumerates the many practical [problems](#) that decriminalization would create. Inevitably the government would control every aspect of legally available psychotropic drugs — their manufacture, importation, and sale. They would instantly become a magnet for corrupt officials.

Moreover, lawmakers faced with spiraling budget deficits would be sorely tempted to impose high “sin taxes” on these morally problematic products. Gray market incentives for criminals (viz. [cigarette smuggling](#)) would engender the very same Prohibition-style violence that decriminalization advocates decry. If taxes miraculously remained low and “street” prices for the drugs dropped (no risk premium), consumption would skyrocket and (more) violence and social dislocation would follow. We would end up right back where we started, but worse off.

International Anti-American Campaigns, Funded in Part by Narco-traffickers

The international drug cartels are increasingly shipping their products from Venezuela through rapidly destabilizing Central American countries and into Mexico for overland smuggling into the United States. From Taliban jihads funded with opium profits to the trouble Hugo Chavez is stirring up in Colombia (via drug-trafficking FARC guerillas) and elsewhere in the region, would-be totalitarian dictators bent on overthrowing democratic governments and undermining U.S. influence are working closely with narco-traffickers.

Gustavo Coronel, a Venezuelan expatriate and engineer who has studied the would-be president-for-Life for years, notes that Chavez has cut ties with U.S. drug enforcement officials and ordered Venezuelan government officials to cooperate with the drug cartels instead. [Venezuela is now the principal conduit](#) for Andean cocaine going to the United States and Europe.

Using the immense cash flow generated by oil sales and narco-trafficking, Chavez has provided financing for extreme left presidential candidacies in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Recent U.S. government reports tie another President-for-life wannabee, [Manuel Zelaya](#) of Honduras, to Chavez cocaine cash and trafficking. Chavez also [reportedly helped to bankroll](#) the campaign of leftist Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, who nearly won the Mexican presidency in 2006. Dr. Castañeda makes no mention of any of these very significant aspects of the current threat.

The “Fire Next Door” Is Already Raging — in Both Countries

Rule of law and security are under siege in North America from criminal organizations. Understandably, President Calderón and the Mexican people feel they are bearing a heavy burden in their fight to dismantle drug cartels and stop the flow of tons of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamines to the United States. Since 2006, more than 10,000 Mexicans have been murdered in drug-related killings, 600 of which were law enforcement and military personnel. Mexico’s internal security and future governability are threatened by lawlessness.

Americans also feel increasingly feel victimized and powerless, however, as they watch their government struggling to control the chaos wrought by drug trafficking along the southern border. Mexican drug cartels aggressively push their destructive products on American consumers. They operate in 230 U.S. cities and are America’s largest organized crime threat.

President Calderón has asked for and needs U.S. help. The Bush Administration’s [“Merida Initiative”](#) was modeled on the successful “Plan Colombia.” But implementation has been slow and the current size of the program is inadequate to the task at hand, as Professor Castañeda rightfully points out. The roadblocks, however, have been set up by his former ideological soul-mates on the left. Some Democrats in Congress and leftist U.S. NGOs want to block the assistance, claiming the Mexican military commits serious human rights violations. They seem to forget the human rights of the thousands of victims of drug violence.

Dr. Castañeda complains that “Plan Colombia” was “as much a counter-insurgency effort as a drug-enforcement program.” Why is that a problem, professor? Where do you draw the line between the two threats? Why would we

not want to see the same positive outcomes in Mexico through the Merida Initiative? His answer boils down to four words: “Boots on the Ground.”

Mexico’s Narco-insurgency Armies

Today two major cartels — [Gulf and Sinaloa](#) — battle each other for turf. William and Mary Political Science and renowned expert on Mexican affairs Professor George Grayson calls the violence of the cartels “grotesquely brutal”; beheadings are commonplace. He [tallied up](#) their arsenals, which include AR-15 and AK-47 assault rifles (Chavez recently purchased [200,000 AK-47s from the Russians](#)), MP5s and 50-mm machine guns, grenade launchers, ground-to-air missiles, dynamite, bazookas, and helicopters. None of these military-grade weapons could be obtained legally from the United States. Professor Castañeda repeats the media meme by alleging that, again, it’s America’s fault since the guns doing the killing in Mexico come from the United States.

[In fact](#) most of the conventional and military weapons come from third countries. Many have been stolen from Mexican army depots by the [“Zetas,”](#) former Mexican army commandos gone bad.

Dr. Castañeda faults President Calderón for using the military to take on “all of the cartels, all the time.” The reality is that Calderón has no choice; the survival of the Mexican state is at risk. The Mexican government is fighting a series of drug-funded mini-insurgencies for control of huge chunks of the national territory. In a recent report, General McCaffrey explained that the local police are out-gunned and corrupted. Only the military can face the cartels and their platoon-sized units using night vision goggles, encrypted communications, sophisticated information operations, and sea-going submersibles. Professor Castañeda’s lament that Chile and Colombia have organized effective police forces while Mexico has not only serves to highlight another failure of the Mexican elites to lead.

Both Countries Are Threatened — the USA Must Defend Mexico’s Sovereignty

The Obama Administration has sent disquieting and confusing signals about the direction of its drug policy. White House Drug Czar Kerlikowske claims the “war on drugs” is over and that the Administration is now waging a vaguely defined “war on a product” that emphasizes new drug demand reduction and treatment options. Gone is the Bush Administration’s hard-line stance on enforcement, replaced by softer and more permissive policies that green-light “medical marijuana” and coddle users by promoting “needle exchanges.”

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. Ironically, 160 years after the Mexican–American War, only the Americans have the capacity to help the Mexicans defeat the narco-terrorists and preserve their sovereignty. Active-duty, uniformed U.S. military help is not necessary — U.S. government civilians can give advice and training in addition to keeping track of sophisticated U.S. military equipment.

President Obama should also get personally involved in the U.S. demand reduction effort by loudly and clearly voicing his personal opposition to drug consumption and abuse, and by speaking directly on the harm done, not only by trafficking, but also by consumption of illegal substances, including marijuana. This would significantly boost the effectiveness of demand reduction messages at home and abroad and bring needed clarity to the president’s stance on the issue.

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. Such bravery could even help him realize his dream of winning Mexico’s presidency.

Dare to take a stand for the right thing in Mexico, professor, don’t take the “easy” way out. Don’t support the legal sanctioning of these physically and morally destructive drugs. Rally the center-left and leftist parties to support Calderón in his fight against the cartels. Be the one to finally say to the Mexican people and the elites, enough corruption!

Stand against the dark forces, professor, and prevail!

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