

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *The U.S. Drug War Comes to Honduras*

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*New York Times* correspondent Thom Shanker [broke the story](#) on May 5 that the U.S. military had established three base camps in Honduras to help that country combat the increasingly powerful Mexican drug cartels. The Obama administration authorized this new, and potentially quite dangerous, military operation without congressional approval or the slightest public debate by the American people. That aspect is merely the latest evidence that Obama is as much a devotee of the imperial presidency as any of his predecessors.

But this move should not have come as a great surprise. The Mexican cartels have become a major force [in nearly all of the Central American countries](#), especially Honduras and Guatemala, over the past four years. Political leaders in Central America, as well as their U.S. counterparts, have grown increasingly worried that one or more of those countries could become de facto narcostates.

The increased cartel activity in Central America is a direct result of the vigorous, military-led offensive against those organizations in Mexico during President Felipe Calderón's presidency. That offensive has been a fiasco for Mexico, resulting in the deaths of more than fifty thousand people in the past five and a half years and turning portions of the country into full-fledged war zones.

One key effect of the offensive, though, has been to pressure the cartels to find safer locales for their operations. That incentive has caused several of the trafficking organizations to greatly expand their presence in neighboring Central American countries, where government institutions, security forces and civil societies are significantly weaker than in Mexico. Whether that was an inadvertent effect or a deliberate goal of the Calderón government is uncertain. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Mary Anastasia O'Grady suspects it is the latter. [According to O'Grady](#), "Mexico seeks to raise the cost

of trafficking so that the flows go elsewhere.” And, one might add, so that much of the violence accompanying the drug trade also goes elsewhere.

But even if it is not a deliberate ploy by Mexico’s government to “beggar thy neighbor,” the impact is the same. Central American governments have become increasingly vocal in wanting heightened financial and security assistance from Washington. The latest measures in Honduras confirm that the Obama administration is determined to take stronger action against the cartels.

Sending U.S. military personnel into Honduras to wage the war on drugs, though, is ill-advised. American military commanders openly state that they intend to apply the lessons learned in Iraq to the situation in Honduras. That anyone would regard the Iraq debacle as a template for future military operations is more than a little worrisome. The [principal lesson](#) of the Iraq war should be to avoid murky counterinsurgency/nation-building crusades, not to try to pursue such missions more effectively.

Given Central America’s geographic proximity, the United States does have some security interests at stake there. No one wants to see even one of those countries come under the control of the vicious Mexican drug cartels.

But trying to thwart the cartels with this strategy is akin to putting a Band Aid on a malignancy. The primary reason the cartels are so powerful both in Mexico and Central America has to do with fundamental principles of economics. There is a huge demand for drugs, especially in the United States but also in Europe and, increasingly, in other portions of the world. When such a robust demand for a product exists, it is an economic certainty that profit-seeking entities will try to fulfill that demand. Prohibiting commerce in a product does not negate that dynamic, it merely perverts it. Instead of legitimate businesses engaging in lawful competition, the trade falls into the hands of elements that don’t mind breaking the law and assuming all the other risks in a black market. Often, that means that the most ruthless, violent individuals and organizations come to dominate the trade.

Because of the black-market risk premium, profit margins are far wider than normal, filling the coffers of illicit traffickers and giving them ample financial resources to challenge competitors and either corrupt or neutralize government institutions. That is what happened in the United States during the Prohibition era, when the government tried to ban alcoholic beverages. That is what is happening today, especially in the Western Hemisphere, with the prohibition of marijuana, cocaine and other illegal drugs. And [the major beneficiaries are the Mexican cartels](#).

Unfortunately, the Obama administration [stubbornly refuses to recognize that reality](#). Instead of moving to abandon the futile, counterproductive prohibition strategy, the president and his advisers seem intent on sending U.S. military personnel into yet another quagmire, this time in Central America. The deployment in Honduras appears to be the first, fateful step into the quicksand.

