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Re-Framing Drug Violence

- [The Skeptics](#)

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If there's a fire in your kitchen, the temptation is to throw water on it—but not if it's a [grease fire](#). In a similar vein, the U.S. government's [get-tough](#) approach to drugs is counterproductive.



Today, the Cato Institute released a new study by [Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter](#) examining the failures of Mexico's drug war. Titled *Undermining Mexico's Drug Cartels*, his study focuses on the impact of drug prohibition and the debate over legalization. It also addresses the worrying prospect of the violence raging south of the border spilling into the United States.

Many observers assume that drug cartels are the only ones responsible for the bloodbath enveloping Mexico. Widely ignored is the indirect culpability of the American and Mexican governments. Leading international drug-war expert [Sanho Tree](#), with whom I appeared on a panel a couple of years back at the [C.U. Boulder Conference on World Affairs](#), argues that drug cartels are not in the business of killing people. It's bad for business. Certainly a drug cartel or a random street gang may fight for control of trafficking corridors, but state-directed drug arrests remove players and thus open valuable real estate over which rival gangs then fight.

The government is also busy eliminating cartel competition. Those traffickers arrested or killed are often sloppy and incompetent—it's the most efficient, most innovative and most adaptive who thrive. On the macro level, as Tree brilliantly argues, this is what we see today in Mexico: state-directed efforts are selectively creating coteries of super-traffickers.

Like putting out a grease fire with water, employing the tools of war against the social phenomenon of drugs has been wholly destructive. It's bad enough that the government boosts drug prices by artificially constricting supply while demand remains constant. But the drug war has been far too costly in terms of human life to ignore all of its contributing factors. Accountability for drug violence must be laid at the feet not only of ruthless drug cartels but also of American analysts and officials too obtuse or self-serving to see the failure of their policies.