The American War on Drugs and its Effects on Mexico

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For my research paper, I want to focus on the American War on Drugs and analyze how such policies have impacted Mexico. To do so, I plan to focus heavily on the Mérida Initiative which is a security-related agreement between the governments of the United States, Mexico and various Central American countries with the established goal being to deter the threats of drug trafficking throughout the region ranging from organized violence to money laundering. I want to put this 2007 agreement, made under the former U.S. President George W. Bush and former Mexico President Felipe Calderon, in the context of the American War on Drugs and the political, social, and cultural contention that was created between the regions in light of the declared war and how this agreement differentiated from the political status quo by signaling the beginning of an era of cooperation between the countries in order to combat the transnational drug trade. Lastly, I will explain how political events within the last decade have hurt the success of the Mérida Initiative and analyze the current state of the act and the relations between the governments in maintaining the fight against the drug trade.

Origins of the War on Drugs

Despite decades of American politicians, government agencies, and media framing the War on Drugs as an issue that was not of their own making and portraying the United States as a champion of social safety, the self-proclaimed “war” in question was, in fact, a result of the American culture, politics, and economy tracing back to the 1960s. While there are indeed a plethora of factors that both contributed to and further perpetuated this complex war found within the borders of the United States, as well as outside such borders, the fact of the matter is that the real origins of this issue adhere to the most basic of economic principles: supply and demand. If not for the American cultural revolution known as “the summer of love” which infiltrated every corner of the country, even spilling across international borders, the use of, and therefore the demand for, psychoactive drugs would not have presented impoverished Central American and Mexican communities with the incentive to leave their relatively low-risk occupations in favor of a career in the lucrative business of international drug trafficking.

To put the rate of drug usage throughout America in the 1960s into perspective, consider that the Federal Bureau of Narcotics estimated that the black market in 1966 for heroin, the most profitable drug at the time, was worth more than $600 million annually (Grillo 43). At the same time, both the attitudes towards and markets for marijuana were also changing. According to a 1969 Gallup poll, only 4% of American adults surveyed had tried marijuana. However, by 1973 that number had tripled, and by 1977, 24% of American adults reported to have engaged in marijuana consumption (Robison 2002). Most astonishingly, estimates have been made that report the 1980 American drug market to have been worth more than $100 billion a year (Grillo 43). All this goes to show how rapidly the demand for these drugs grew, meaning the market for those products grew at a similar rate.

However, while the culture and politics of the United States was transforming rapidly, its southern neighbor was undergoing a transformative economic crisis along with several other Latin American countries. Essentially, two sudden and dramatic shifts in oil prices during the 1970s created a budgetary surplus for exporting countries while causing worsening deficits for several importing countries, specifically Mexico. To alleviate complications for both groups, the United States stepped in to provide financial assistance and stability as a sort of middleman. By the end of 1970, the amount owed to U.S. commercial banks from these borrowers was $29 billion. In the aftermath of this global economic hiccup, the new debt total peaked at $327 billion in 1982 (Sims and Romero 2013). Later that year, Mexican Finance Minister Jesús Silva Herzog, along with sixteen other Latin American countries, informed top U.S. and global creditor officials that Mexico would be unable to repay its acquired debt, cementing a global economic recession (Sims and Romero 2013). Once the financial aid Mexico had become dependent upon was abruptly cut off, the country tail-spun into an era characterized by levels of "high unemployment, steep declines in per capita income, and stagnant or negative growth—hence the term the 'lost decade'" (Sims and Romero 2013). The crisis would come to a close as the decade did in 1989 when the U.S. made deals with the eighteen indebted countries for mutual financial alleviation on the condition that Mexico and the accompanying states would implement various domestic fiscal reforms (Sims and Romero 2013). Such reforms tended to favor free-market endeavors, laying the groundwork for more drastic economic restructuring in the future.

Unsurprisingly, many Mexican citizens fell victim to drug abuse in the midst of this financial crisis — trends commonly seen accompanying one another. The two drugs that rapidly rose to prominence across the country, marijuana and cocaine, would also end up being two of the most lucrative exports the country would come to rely on. Just in the last decade of the twentieth century, Mexico saw a dramatic increase in drug use among its citizens, particularly among younger men. According to a 2003 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, as of 1991 4.5% of male students in Mexico City admitted to experimenting with marijuana and 1.8% with cocaine. By 2000, the usage rate for the same population rose to 8.3% for marijuana and 7.4% for cocaine (Medina-Mora et. al 114). This data shows how the expanding culture of increased levels of drug use among young people, which had been prevalent in America for many years at this point, was beginning to make its way into Mexican society at a time when the population was exceptionally vulnerable.

Although levels of drug use in Mexico were relatively stable until the 1990s, the American drug market was already dominated by Mexican dealers throughout the preceding decade. By 1984 for example, “Mexico was the source of 36 percent of the heroin, 30 percent of the cocaine, and 9 percent of the marijuana sold in the United States” (Ganster 207). Moreover, of all the drugs consumed across the United States, an estimated 70 to 80 percent have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, usually being smuggled directly through official points of entry (Payan 30). While the drug trade has undoubtedly left its mark on every region of both countries in question, none has felt the effects to the extent of the border region cities and states. While these areas are not necessarily the most densely populated regions of either country, nor do they have abnormally high rates of drug use, “The supply route flourishes along the border because of these two forces: economics and geography” (Payan 25). This consideration of simple geography also aids to explain why “border asymmetries such as differences in income levels, unemployment, and the low-skill levels of many Mexican workers” (Payan 29) only amplify the attractive financial incentives of the drug trade along the border.

Government responses (pre-NAFTA)

Given the nature of the negative consequences that have manifested themselves on each side of the border, government action from both countries would seem like the most viable remedy, and while both governments have employed various tactics to circumvent the trade, the nature of the approaches are actually working against one another instead of working off of one another. One of the most obvious examples of this issue is seen in the conflicting approaches to border security. For starters, Mexico's government treats its border as comparatively "open" relative to that of the United States "closed" approach to border security. While both countries are sympathetic to opportunities for the flow of foreign investment and trade, the U.S. approach is much less receptive to the flow of labor across the border which in turn creates friction and further complicates the success of government border initiatives.

While a cohesive definition of security is not an absolute necessity for either country to conduct domestic or internal affairs, "Not having a common definition of security means that there is no common definition of *border* security. That is a fact that impedes any serious cooperation between the two on 'securing the border'" (Payan 194). Essentially, the consequence of not establishing a compatible definition of or approach to border security means that each country is left to decide for itself how they wish to go about regulating the border, and moreover, can do so with no regard for the other country's welfare or wishes.

Security itself can be boiled down to two distinct yet codependent facets; national security and public safety. In a general sense, "national security refers to the threats coming from outside that jeopardize the nation as a whole," (Payan 194) while "Public safety refers to the safeguard of the citizens from each other" (Payan 194). An understanding of these concepts and how each country utilizes them is vital to breaking down the approaches both the United States and Mexico have taken to ameliorate the drug trade.

Given that most of the issues created by the drug trade that Mexico faces are from within its own borders and directly impact everyday Mexican citizens, it makes sense that the ideas of national security and public safety are more rigid and distinct from one another than would be the case in other countries more entrenched in global affairs. In light of this, Mexico's approach to border security is centered around the desire to provide for public safety. Ironically, "If there is any threat to Mexican sovereignty, most Mexicans, in fact, believe that it would come from the United States" (Payan 195).

One of the most obvious examples of Mexico favoring public safety over national security is demonstrated by the tradition followed by past administrations to cooperate with the cartels instead of directly attempting to eradicate them all together. Given the tendency for cartel-related violence to spike in response to government action, the Mexican government often felt backed into a corner left with no option but to conspire with the cartels to a certain extent. Essentially, these deals "implied that the protected group would keep its executions and level of violence to a minimum and its operations out of the public's eye" (Payan 62). This willingness on behalf of Mexico's federal government to turn a blind eye to the killing of their own citizens in order to maintain a facade created to exaggerate how safe the public really was goes to show how deeply Mexico valued public safety — or at least how much they wanted it to appear that way.

On the other hand, the United States has taken a much different approach to combating the public panic induced by the drug trade. Instead of framing it as an issue of public safety, which would imply that the threat has already infiltrated American society and communities, the

U.S. government has continuously tried to ease the mind of its citizens by framing the War on Drugs as an issue that is a threat to national security. The implications that follow this approach perpetuate the ideas that "increased militarization of the border, undue surveillance, excessive punitive measures, and even human rights abuses are all justified" (Payan 197) because it is viewed in a light that makes it seem as though the entire existence of the country is solely contingent upon this single issue, therefore granting the government amnesty for virtually any action they claim to be necessary. The consequences, whether intentional or unintentional, of an issue being one of national security is exactly how the War on Drugs came to be just that — an "all-out war" as declared by then U.S. President Richard M. Nixon.

The powers Nixon was able to grant himself by formally declaring a war set the tone for the uncooperative relations between the two neighboring governments for years to come thereafter. Shortly after announcing his bid to the White House in 1968, Nixon's presidential campaign centered around the staple conservative slogan of "law and order" and emulating the corresponding ideologies. Once Nixon and his cabinet made a home of the White House in January of 1969, no time was wasted on fulfilling their campaign promise of combating the drug trade with unwavering commitment. In June of that same year, a mere six months into Nixon's first term, officials from the U.S. government were sent to Mexico City in an attempt to persuade the Mexican government to spray a poison called Agent Orange over fields of marijuana and opium crop (Grillo 44). Observing the lethal side effects of Agent Orange deployment in the Vietnam War and feeling as though many of the requests made by the U.S. officials impeded too much on Mexican sovereignty, the Mexican government refused. Weeks later, Nixon created the Action Task Force composed of the heads of all executive agency departments and charged it with devising and executing a "frontal attack" on the trafficking of narcotics across the border

(Craig, *Operation Intercept* 560). Eventually, the U.S. followed through with yet another unilateral approach by implementing Operation Intercept on September 21, 1969 (Craig, *Operation Intercept* 565). Knowing that the vast majority of drugs that entered the U.S. from Mexico were smuggled through official points of entry, the new policy required that every vehicle and pedestrian which attempted to enter the United States along the entirety of the southern border be thoroughly inspected (Grillo 44). Soon after implementation chaos ensued. Traffic from cars waiting to be inspected backed up into border cities like Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana meaning that workers could not get to their jobs, legitimate trade goods rotted, and revenue throughout border cities crashed (Grillo 44). All in all, after just seventeen days of use, $30 million of American taxpayer money, an influx of complaints, and an underwhelming amount of drugs having been seized, Operation Intercept was suspended (Craig, *Operation Intercept* 566).

However, the taint that was left on Nixon's presidency in the aftermath of Operation Intercept was soon outdone by the creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in 1963. By way of an executive order, Nixon created an entirely new executive agency purposed to "establish a single unified command to combat an all-out global war on the drug menace" (Grillo 46). At the time of the agency's establishment, it was granted 1,470 agents and an annual budget of less than $75 million. Today, the DEA has accumulated 5,235 agents, offices in 63 countries and an annual budget of more than $2.3 billion (Grillo 46).

Following a series of political events in the aftermath of Operation Intercept, most notably a change in executive leadership in both countries, Mexico's government launched its biggest anti-drug offensive in 1976 with support from the United States. This approach differentiated from the government's usual trend of "managing the crime" and signals a shift towards "fighting the crime." As the details for the operation were released bit by bit beginning at the end of 1975, it was readily apparent that this approach was meant to be much more aggressive than past initiatives had been. Officials announced that it would be a full-time, $35 million operation utilizing the most advanced technology (Craig *Operation Condor* 347). Most notably, however, was the emphasis placed on cooperation between Mexico's federal government with state governments, with the Justice Department and the Army, and with the United States and other forgein powers (Craig, *Operation Condor* 347). This heightened level of cooperation allowed for Mexico to commit, with U.S. support, to using aerial pesticide spraying as a primary tactic to suppress drug production. The operation was a success in some regards and a failure in others. While the new strategy did work to drastically decrease drug production throughout Mexico, that only addresses one of the two core roots of the drug trade — supply. This means that demand was still there, and where demand is, supply follows close behind. Moreover, government actions have a way of manifesting unintended consequences once implemented. The fusing of these two principles as it relates to Operation Condor meant that once it was known that consuming drugs from Mexico was too risky following mass-exposure to poisonous chemicals, the persistent demand for these drugs by American society led to the production being relocated to Columbia (Grillo 49).

These few specific examples of government approaches to dealing with the drug trade highlight a key component of the history of the War on Drugs; unilateral vs. bilateral approaches. What is meant by a "unilateral" approach is that two entities, in this case governments, each attempt to solve an issue but do so with no regard or collaboration with the other and are simply acting in ways which they believe will result in the most favorable outcome for their own interests. Conversely, a bilateral approach differs in that it requires these entities to work together and act in ways which will equally further the interests of all parties involved. The ways in which this concept applies to the efforts of both governments to combat the drug trade is obvious. As described earlier, the United States has shown a tendency throughout history to go about foreign affairs, particularly this one, favoring and protecting national security over public safety. When a unilateral approach to affairs is placed in the context of the implications of an issue which is treated as though it threatens the very being of a country, it amplifies the level of noncooperation that would be considered appropriate, often to the point of becoming more detrimental to the other country. Moreover, "Instead of closing the gaps where [criminals] operate with joint policies, we broaden them with unilateral policies" (Payan198). This means that when an issue is being combated in two distinct and separate manners, the inevitable inconsistencies between the approaches will leave space for the very activity that is trying to be expelled to continue unnoticed.

Impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

Prospects for cooperation between the United States and Mexico seemed rather bleak following two decades of unilateral action with comparatively little evidence of collaboration to make up for it. However, the signing of NAFTA in 1993 under U.S. President Bill Clinton, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (Bondarenko 2020) signaled a shift in approach suggesting higher levels of transcontinental cooperation. After witnessing the success of European Economic Community pact in the later half of the twentieth century, North American officials were inspired to create a similar low-tariff trade agreement. The key provisions of NAFTA were primarily focused on easing international trade restrictions by gradually reducing tariffs between the three countries, ensuring eventual duty-free availability for a wide variety of common goods and even banning the implementation of tariffs on some specific products known as “national goods” (Bondarenko 2020). Supporters of free market economies believed that the effects of NAFTA would include higher rates of GDP for each nation based on higher levels of productivity in trade and production and the abundant creation of jobs. However, critics of NAFTA asserted that these neo-liberal economic policies were being manipulated by and for big corporations in an effort to increase profit margins by decreasing the cost of labor, which would lead to the exploitation of North American workers. Further, it was argued that NAFTA would have grave environmental consequences (Bondarenko 2020).

On the surface, NAFTA seems to have been a success given the trends suggesting increased economic prosperity through the 1990s. Keep in mind though, that Mexico was desperate to pull itself out of the 1980s economic recession, so the promise of expedited trade and increased GDP and foreign investment was that much more attractive. For example, Mexican tariffs in 1984 averaged 24% and by 1990 had been reduced to 11% (Ganster 222). Considering that this reduction occurred in reaction to the crisis and before the implementation of NAFTA, it was known that Mexico was already sympathetic to prospects of becoming more prominent in the increasingly interconnected global economy, making NAFTA that much more secure.

Once NAFTA was actually implemented in 1994, trade did increase — drastically. Specifically, “12 to 13 times over” (Payan 204). Accordingly, as trade increased so did traffic along the border. For key U.S. border states from 1995 through 2004 the number of trucks crossing the southern border increased by 167% in California, 109% in Arizona, 160% in Texas, and 1,378% in New Mexico (Ganster 226). In the broadest analysis, the simple value of traded goods from the U.S. to Mexico grew by $65 billion from 1994-2000 while goods from Mexico into the U.S. grew by $90 billion (U.S. Dept. of Transportation 2011).

While it is clear that trade revenue did increase in the wake of NAFTA, the effects were not evenly distributed. In line with initial fears of NAFTA opponents, Mexican workers were undeniably exploited as the promise of increased job opportunities and wages that were intended to enrich North American families were off-shored to countries that offered even laxer labor laws (Fernandez-Kelly and Massey 103) . Further, the absence of tariffs encouraged unprecedented levels of trade, as expected. However, prolific U.S. manufacturers, especially in the agricultural sector, abused this and poured unnecessary amounts of product, such as corn, into the Mexican market at artificially low prices. In 1992, Mexican corn cost $240/ton and Iowa corn was bought for $110/ton (Ganster 229). Expectedly, the Iowa corn was bought at much higher rates and eventually depleted the entire Mexican corn market, taking away an industry and source of revenue that thousands of Mexicans had previously relied on. This example of intentional market manipulation in reaction to nominal tariffs is not an isolated example and helps to explain why NAFTA fell short of effectively providing for increased job opportunities, and could even be used to argue that NAFTA actually stole jobs instead of provided them.

As would be expected of higher levels of cooperation and interconnectedness between two neighboring countries looming over a national loss of jobs, immigration rates from Mexico began to rise in the wake of NAFTA. In pre-NAFTA 1993, the estimated number of immigrants entering the U.S. from Mexico was about 370,000 annually. Unsurprisingly, that number jumped to around 570,000 by 1995, one year after NAFTA was implemented (Passel et. al 2012). One could reasonably expect that increase to be a reaction to losses of opportunities and wages at home in search for promises of abundance abroad.

Realizing the implications and consequences associated with NAFTA help to frame the state of relations between the American and Mexican governments as drug trafficking and usage rates were on the rise at the closing of the century. Increased levels of cooperation and trust as well as transforming social, cultural and economic circumstances all played a role to change the dynamic and lay the groundwork for future U.S.-Mexican bilateral initiatives. Additionally, essential to a deeper understanding of the War on Drugs is an assessment on how economic factors brought about by NAFTA changed the geography and socio-economic status of Mexico's public, particularly how rising unemployment levels left many Mexicans with no viable option for a career, further incentivizing entrance to the drug trade and glamorizing the financial benefits.

Government responses (post-NAFTA)

As explained earlier, the Mexican government had a corrupt reputation surrounding its approach to fighting the cartels. Whether it was the federal government, police officers, border officials, or some other authority, the status quo was to allow the cartels to operate under a mutual understanding that violence would be kept to a minimum as long as government oversight followed suit. However, Mexico’s 2000 presidential election would open the door for reforms as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) would not wield the power inherited by the presidency for the first time in over 70 years. Considering PRI rhetoric controlled Mexico’s approach to the drug trade since the issue first arose, the new president, Vicente Fox Quesada of the National Action Party (PAN), went about the issue much differently.

PRI semi-authoritarian rule was characterized by a corrupt government so entrenched in the operations of the drug trade and cartels it proved itself incapable of meaningfully combating the issue (Capetillo 19). In light of this, Fox 's approach to governing was markedly different than his predecessors. The PAN approach was focused on eradicating internal corruption, increasing accessibility to the political process, and creating a generally more democratic mode of government (Capetillo 1). After decades of drug trafficking groups being in cahoots with the government was abruptly ended with anti-corruption policies, violence began to spike both in frequency and severity. In response to this trend, Fox weighed his political options and ultimately took a very American route — treating drug trafficking as an issue of national security (Capetillo 44). Despite having support from the federal government, many state and local institutions were still under the control of the PRI ideologies, making a unified government response impossible to showcase to the cartels. This lack of unity meant that many local government officials were directly contradicting the federal approach by still working with the cartels. “The cohesiveness that had characterized the Mexican government during the twentieth century came undone...enabling the worst wave of crime Mexico has ever seen” (Payan 63). This demonstrates, yet again, why it is so critical for bilateral cooperation to dictate an approach for dealing with the drug trade.

The United States also experienced an administrative transfer occurring in tandem to Mexico’s. According to an official statement from the George W. Bush White House in 2006, drug use levels among young Americans had risen to “unacceptably high levels” over the course of the previous decade (“National Drug Control Strategy” 1). Bush’s strategy was an aggressive yet ambitious one summed up best by the following statement from the same 2006 plan: “Determined to fight this trend, the President set aggressive goals to reduce drug use in the United States, including reducing youth drug use by 10 percent in two years. That goal has been met and exceeded” (“National Drug Control Strategy” 1). It is important to note the aggressive tone displayed by Bush at this point in time which was similarly reflected in the government approach of America's southern counterpart.

Just as a cooperative approach seems likely in 2006, Mexico elects a new president. However, the election of President Felipe Calderón did not halt cooperative efforts between the United States and Mexico, in fact, it accelerated them. Calderón, like Fox, was elected from the right-wing PAN party and accordingly took a similar approach as his predecessor in terms of framing the issue as the gravest matter of national security and the top priority of his administration (Payan 31). Within the same month that he was elected, December 2006, Calderón officially militarized Mexico's governmental approach to drug trafficking, becoming only the second country behind Columbia to take such bold action ("Drug War Timeline" 2015). In addition to establishing a military presence in cities most under the control of the cartels, Calderón's actions included revitalizing a federal police force, advancing the Mexican government's intelligence capabilities, and replacing and mixing traditional police forces with military personnel to discourage collaboration between local officials with the cartels (Payan 31). While these years do not offer many examples of obvious cooperation between nations, the similar styles adopted by the respective administrations serves as a precursor for what would amount to be the greatest collaborative effort between the U.S. and Mexico against drug trafficking.

The Mérida Initiative: ushering in an era of bilateral cooperation

What sets the Mérida Initiative apart from other drug trafficking-related policies is not merely contingent upon how far-reaching this policy was, but rather about the degree of cooperation that it implied. Introduced in 2007 and signed into law in December 2008 under presidents Calderon and Bush, the Mérida Initiative opened "a chapter of historic cooperation and [acknowledged] the shared responsibilities of the United States and Mexico to counter drug-fueled violence threatening citizens on both sides of the border" ("The Merida Initiative" 2015).

At its origins, the Méridan Initiative appropriated $2.3 billion in funding with approval from the U.S. Congress to be sent to Mexico ("The Merida Initiative" 2015). Deviating from the norm of government policy initiatives, this one was comparatively well thought out in terms of the specific plans for implementation. The term "Strategic Framework" was coined to describe the four pillars of implementation: (1) Disrupt the capacity of organized crime to operate, (2) Institutionalize the capacity to sustain rule of law, (3) Create a 21st century border structure, and (4) Build strong and resilient communities ("The Merida Initiative" 2015). The first pillar placed emphasis on deterring the drug trade from the ground up by "capturing and incarcerating their leaders...interdicting drugs, stopping money laundering, and diminishing production" ("The Merida Initiative" 2015). The second pillar essentially laid the groundwork for what was expected of Mexico in terms of reinforcing public security and the rule of law by professionalizing the military and reforming correctional facilities. Pillar three was all concerned with further securitizing and militarizing the border by implementing modern technology and tactics. Lastly, pillar four highlighted the importance of rebuilding and strengthening distraught communities while emphasizing the importance of abiding by the law and expanding social safety nets, job opportunities, and community confidence ("The Merida Initiative" 2015). Initially, the funding was only approved through 2009, however, succeeding Bush, U.S. President Barack Obama renewed the funding and continued working with Mexican officials to deter the North American drug trade (Capetillo 89).

While on the surface this plan may seem impenetrable, a deeper analysis of the policy highlights some crippling shortcomings. For starters, the ways in which implementation was established placed a lot of importance on the Mexican military. In doing this the United States is subtly encouraging operations expected to yield highly visible results which would then be presented to congress to secure additional funding. What this boils down to is that policies that are proven to be effective but are not as high-profile as drug busts, community policing for example, are effectively abandoned in favor of tactics that may not be as effective but are more theatrical. Next, some critics of the policy say it encourages further intrusion on Mexican sovereignty by the U.S as it forces Mexico to rely too heavily on direction and aid from the U.S. Remembering how essential the military has become to ensuring basic public safety throughout Mexico, a dangerous implication of this is that it could imply that the Mexican military is controlled by the U.S. government which would in turn limit public trust in the military and limit the military's commitment to the government.

In addition to questionable hypothetical results, the practical results are also somewhat confounding. In the fews years after the Mérida Initiative implementation, Mexican cartels had established operations in more Central American countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Payan 31). This should not come as a surprise, however, and could have even been predicted based on events under past administrations which demonstrate that when supply is regulated more seriously than demand, the supply simply is moved to a less regulated location to continue as normal. More importantly, in reaction to Calderon's stricter approach, cartel violence also expanded geographically through Mexico to regions that were previously protected from such threats (Payan 64). When the magnifying glass is removed from the suppliers and placed over the users, the success of the initiative is still underwhelming. At the onset of the War on

Drugs in 1971 it was reported that slightly over one death per 100,000 Americans was in connection with a drug overdose. This statistic rose to 3.4 per 100,000 in 1990, twelve in 2008, and 14.7 by 2014 (Coyne and Hall 7). What this shows is that despite all the efforts to deter drug trafficking by either governments, the billions of dollars that have been spent on stricter enforcement and more advanced technology have not proven to be as effective as hoped.

Despite pessimistic data, however, the Mérida Initiative still has its silver linings. For example, the collaborative efforts of both U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies ended in the arrest of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, or "El Chapo," in 2014. Guzmán, the notorious leader of the Sinaloa cartel, was on the run from authorities for months, even years, before his capture and all the while he maintained his status as one of, if not the most, important figures in the drug trade (Ahmed 2016). What this bilateral operation shows is that although the Mérida Initiative may have fell short of its stated goals, the relationship that was fostered between the U.S. and Mexico from the act was restored at least enough to collaborate on direct interdiction instances. Further, "the recapture of Mr. Guzmán...is about Mexico repairing its security relationship with America; its image globally; and perhaps most important, its leaders' relationship with their own people" (Ahmed 2016).

As for more recently, recent changes in Mexican governance and politics within the past decade have called the longevity of the Mérida Initiative into question. Most notable is the instance of Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, openly criticizing the policy along the campaign trail. Obrador was elected in 2018 as Mexico's first democratically elected leftist president (Sheridan 2019), a notable shift in ideology from the administrations the policy was created under. "It hasn't worked," Obrador said. "We don't want cooperation in the use of force, we want cooperation for development" (Sheridan 2019). Simply put, Obrador is wanting an approach that deescalates the roles security and military enforcement play, and moves the emphasis towards community-centered programs.

A second event that has called the sustainability of the initiative into question as of late is that of the arrest of former Mexican Secretary of Defense, Salvador Cienfuegos. Cienfuegos was arrested in October of 2020 in California on charges that he had conspired with cartels during his six-year term as defense secretary from 2012-2018 (Sieff et. al 2020). This event has effectively left a stain on status of bilateral U.S.-Mexico drug trafficking prevention. Mexico views it as an embarrassment to their authority and legitimacy with President Obrador stating, “that the arrest may have been made ‘for political or other reasons’ and accused the Drug Enforcement Administration of ‘meddling’” (Sieff et. al 2020). The full story and subsequent implications of this event are still unclear, but it certainly calls into question what will happen to the relatively bilateral, cooperative relationship that has been in place over the past decade, and how such relations could impact the future of the Mérida Initiative — a policy which has already consumed at least $3.1 billion of American taxpayer money (Beittel 4).

Solution: Drug decriminalization/legalization

Obviously, the War on Drugs is an extremely complex issue with many factors working to have created it in the first place and even more that have only perpetuated the longest war the U.S. has ever been engaged in. Further, despite many efforts to alleviate the pressures of the drug trade through heightened security and complicated policy enactments, none have contributed to any meaningful reduction in drug trafficking or drug use along the border region.

I believe the most logical step that can be taken, and one that would lead to the most practical success, is simply to decriminalize drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin throughout the entire continent of North America. While this may at first seem like a radical idea with inherently dangerous outcomes, the decades of trying to completely eradicate such drug use has only made matters worse.

The most simple way of understanding the purpose of this proposal is to recognize that imposing complete illegality does nothing to decrease the demand of a good, and where there is demand, there will always be supply. Take alcohol prohibition both in the U.S. and Mexico for example; neither country proved able to rid society of alcohol despite fervent political will to do so. Why? Because eliminating supply does not eliminate demand.

However, do not think that the premise of this proposal is to encourage drug use or to embrace the dangers of such actions. Rather, it is to provide safety and regulation for an industry that has proved inexpugnable time and time again. The status of a good being unwaveringly illegal prevents any official regulations or checks from being applicable to the good. This fact applies to drugs in that "When drugs are illegal, users cannot use formal legal channels to resolve disputes or seek legitimate protection for their business transactions" (Coyne and Hall 5). Essentially, the "illegality of the business means that business disputes...can be settled only through violence, not through the courts" (Boaz, 197). Simply put, the lack of legal channels available to those involved in the drug trade forces them to resort to violence, meaning that drug use does not promote violence — prohibition does.

However, the dangers that prohibition places on the drug market go beyond just the conflicts can arise from business transactions. Referring back to an earlier point, illegality takes away any chance of regulation. This means that prohibition also makes drug use itself more dangerous because there is no agency permitted to assess and ensure quality or safety beforehand. Consider that "since 2011, the amount of marijuana confiscated at POEs has fallen by about one-third...Mirroring this fall, heroin seizures have tripled and meth seizures have quintupled" (Payan 52). These numbers help to support multiple arguments for the abolition of prohibition. For starters, it demonstrates that stricter enforcement over one good, in this case marijuana, simply works to shift that demand to a different, often more dangerous good, in this case heroin and meth. Further, this shows how if these drugs were capable of being regulated and ensured for quality before use, the risk of the adverse effects of these drugs would also be reduced, making it a safer market overall.

It is expected that a policy proposal like this would be met with backlash and dialogue purposed to undermine the act's practicality and efficacy. However, ending the prohibition of specific drugs has happened sixteen times in the United States within the past decade, and such acts have always avoided the initially feared unintended negative consequences. Take Colorado, the first U.S. state to legalize recreational marijuana, for example. For starters, the price per unit of marijuana fell between 16 and 30 percent within just the first few years of legalization (Payan 26), meaning that the financial allure that is known to attract willful criminals was reduced, creating a safer market. Next, in 2015 alone Colorado collected an additional $125 million in revenue solely from the marijuana industry (Payan 26) and more impressively, was able to simultaneously save taxpayer funds both by imposing taxes on the industry while reducing law enforcement presence. In addition to these benefits, states that have legalized marijuana have experienced lower incarceration rates, safer usage, and are now able to better allocate money towards various community health and safety programs.

After analyzing the half-century-long War on Drugs, it is clear that a policy such as this would not work in the United States and Mexico if all three North American countries are not in agreement. Going back to how supply and demand and geography affect the drug trade, if drug prohibition were ended in two of the three countries and maintained in the third, that third country would inevitably turn into a trampoline for drug trafficking to its neighbors. Say, for example, that prohibition was ended in Mexico and Canada but continued in the United States. Evidence and experience suggests that in this hypothetical scenario, the United States would soon act as the middleman for trafficking into and out of its two neighboring states, and would also compromise those safer markets with U.S. drugs that would be more dangerous because of lack of quality assurance and oversight.

Finally, the increased revenue each country would acquire in the aftermath of ending prohibition could be redirected and used to fund border projects these countries frequently express interest in, but claim they lack the funding to take any real action. Examples of this could include border wall construction, restructured training for border patrol officials, new border facilities, and more. Additionally, this money could also be invested back into border cities that the senseless War on Drugs has left in shambles plagued by high crime and drug use rates.

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