From Social Control to Social Instability: US-Mexican Relations in the 'War on Drugs' (2000-2008)

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I. Introduction

This article examines the nature of the 'war' on narcotics and its effect on US-Mexican relations, with particular reference to bilateral security relations. First it looks at how the 'war on drugs' has become interwoven into the tapestry of the respective body politics. Narcotics have long

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been part of human history. Indeed, narcotics have always, to a lesser or greater extent, played a role in the relationship between the US and Mexico.

Taken as a whole, the article proffers an insight into the complex and multi-faceted nature of US-Mexican security relations. It also illustrates the degree to which the state, as a political institution, is under threat from non-state organisations and actors which are undermining its *raison d'être*, the provision of law-and-order in the face of a Hobbesian international order, and the US's and Mexico's attempts to maintain *de facto* sovereignty.

II. Social Control to Social Instability: Has the 'war on drugs' been used for the vested interests of the political and socio-economic elite?

This research paper has sought to bring together the pre-existing literature on the issue of narcotics and US-Mexican security relations, weaving them into the wider theoretical framework that is social constructivist analysis. Indeed, in order to provide the required historical understanding and analysis of the 'war on drugs', the pre-existing literature is used to frame the theoretical argument. The argument being that the issue of the criminalisation or otherwise of narcotics and the subsequent response of state actors has in large measure being in reference, if not in correlation with, elite vested interests in the maintenance of social control over the polity as a whole and in particular, lower socio-economic groups and ethnic minorities. This is not to state that the relationship between the 'war on drugs' and social control are a manner of simple correlation, rather that over time social institutions have developed and have built in to the political and social infrastructure of the US and

Mexico. These social institutions continue to interact with social actors today to maintain and re-enforce the vested interests of the elite in the maintenance of social control by the agents of the state. However, recently narcotic cartels in Mexico have gained the upper hand in the 'war on drugs' and called into question the rationale of this on-going police action within North America, as the levels of violence reach new heights, creating in effect a contemporary civil war - that brings social instability to the US-Mexican border region and weakens the Mexican state in particular.

III. The Origins of the 'War on Drugs'

This study of the history of narcotics within the US and Mexico, the author would argue, is key to the wider social constructivist analysis of the 'war on drugs'. The investigation of the historical background allows the reader not only understand the temporal context of social actors and their actions, but also to root the institutional memories and assumptions of society. These have in turn evolved in line with a complex web of interests and identities, often becoming divorced from their initial origins and subsumed into the societal zeitgeist.

Indeed, narcotics were legal in most areas of the world (with the exception of Imperial China) and even considered a panacea for common ailments until comparatively recent times. It was only with the development of a restrictionist lobby in the United States that cultural attitudes changed and with it legal restrictions were enforced. From the late nineteenth century onwards the role of narcotics within both the US and Mexican societies evolved in line with the vested interests of the elite as a means of social control into the twentieth century along the social cleavages of race and class. This combined and interweaved with irrational fears in the populace of the 'other', transmogrifying this fear on to drug addicts

de-humanising them. It is not coincidental that this process of social control was placed on a national footing during this period, rather than the previous patchwork approach in the aftermath of the US Civil War, as the elite sought to maintain social control of the masses and/or other racial groupings. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Mexico played little role in the drugs trade except as a minor transhipment country to the southern US. The Mexican elite during this period had little interest in combating narcotics use, though it prohibited the use of drugs to pacify US restrictionist interest groups and their government, together with a desire on the part of the Mexico City administration to gain greater control of the border region. The issue of narcotics became increasingly important within US-Mexican relations from the early twentieth century as it rose up the political agenda within Washington, having a knock-on effect on the Mexican polity.

The nature of social control has also evolved over time from social taboos in the nineteenth century to the present day use of state-sponsored law enforcement bureaucracies together with the development of a 'prison-industrial complex' to house drug offenders. Furthermore, the role of narcotics within US-Mexican relations has increased over time as the social construction of drug takers and narcotics themselves changed in the respective body politic.

IV. The Contemporary Drugs War (1969 to the present day)

Against this backdrop, on the 14 July 1969 Nixon declared the high level of usage of narcotics as a serious national threat and called for a federal led multi-agency response. The resultant hive of activity in the White House has had knock-on effect on the 'war on drugs', and US-Mexican relations, to the present day. One early response occurred

in September 1969, when the US government instituted Operation Intercept. Officially this was an attempt to block the trade of narcotics across the border, however, as Craig states: 'Intercept was in fact a classic example of economic blackmail' (Craig in Mabry 1989, 28). This formed a critical moment in US-Mexican relations, in which Washington called Mexico's bluff vis-à-vis the counter-narcotics chess game. US officials perceived Mexico's increased role in the provision of narcotics into the US market as an act of bad faith. This led to a sharp rise in counter-narcotics activity by the Mexican authorities and greater cooperation with their northern counterparts, commencing with a programme of eradication and interdiction, indicatively entitled 'Operation Cooperation'. Although this proved ineffectual, it marked an intensification in the 'war on drugs' in Mexico.

This became known as Operation Condor, which registered as a complete success within the metrics of drug control, stemming the flow of narcotics crossing the border, while for the Mexican authorities it diminished the prospect of rural violence in northern states and kept the drug trafficking industry under control. Despite the successes, the narcotics trade in Mexico during the 1970s decreased, but crucially, not knocked out. By the 1980s participants at all levels would learn from their mistakes and regain a foothold within the territory and body politic.

Regarding the US government, the 1969 pronouncement of President Nixon on the dangers of narcotics, resulted in a rapid burgeoning of anti-narcotics agencies within the Washington bureaucracy. Between 1969 and 1973, law enforcement agencies became involved in national security concerns in the form of narcotics, as Holden-Rhodes records:

> The perverse effects of linking drug enforcement and US security quickly became apparent, if not entirely understood. The same aides to President Nixon who were in charge of the war on drugs were also in charge of the Watergate fiasco in 1972. Their dual roles as drug warriors and Plumbers

> belied an underlying congruence of interests between 'drug enforcement' and 'national security' as defined by all the president's men (1994, 29).

The most important institution to be created during the Nixon presidency was the DEA. The DEA was established to be an over-arching super agency, with a key role in both enforcement and in the intelligence community. However, the DEA never fulfilled this aim, partly due to the corruption of the White House at the time and the resultant distrust within the US intelligence community that still pertains today (Holden-Rhodes 1994, 31).

In the latter half of the 1970s, the Mexican share of the drug market decreased due to Operation Condor, with production moving to the Andean region, while trafficking and processing concentrated in Colombia. In response to this shift, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the formation of *La Empresa Coordinadora* in Colombia, which comprised of a loose grouping of narcotics trafficking gangs that acted in cooperation through a series of patron-client relationships. Drug cartels are not, technically, cartels as they control neither the market nor the price of the marketable product, narcotics and as noted by Holden-Rhodes: 'The Colombian cocaine industry may not be a cartel, but it fulfills every other superlative people have used about it. It is the Third World's first truly successful multinational. It is the most profitable business in the world' (1994, 42).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the US drug market was flooded with *La Empresa* produced cocaine (Smith 1992, 12). The response of US politicians was not to engage in a rational debate and the advocating of harm reduction policies. Rather the clamour was for the further criminalisation and marginalisation of users, hand in hand with the militarisation of the 'war on drugs' (Bagley and Aguayo 1993, 129). The political rhetoric reached crescendo point with the amendment of the 1878 *Posse Comitatus* Act via the 1982 Defense Authorization Act,

which enabled US military participation in counter-narcotics operations within US territory to support law enforcement.

The first involvement of the US military came in 1982 when Operation BAT was launched against the trafficking organisation of Carlos Ledher in the Bahamas (Mabry in Bagley and Walker 1995, 43). At this initial stage, military participation consisted of the loan of equipment; it would not be until four years later that US military personnel would be actively involved. The time delay was partly the result of hostility to the notion of military engagement in counter-narcotics operations and a conservative bureaucratic mind set.

US politicians throughout the 1980s grew increasingly frustrated with the military's resistance to their entry into the 'war on drug', which led them (and the President in particular), to seek other means of fighting traffickers. This resulted in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) being formally introduced into the 'war' in 1982, via an executive order. It was not until the 8 April 1986, with the signing of the National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) by President Reagan, that the involvement of military personnel in counter-narcotics missions was permitted. After this the DoD, in particular the Navy and Coastguard service, began to act in cooperation with law enforcement agencies, which resulted in the flow of cocaine and other narcotics to shift to the overland route through Mexico, where counter-narcotics programmes were on the wane by the 1980s.

V. Rise and Rise of the Mexican Narcotics Cartels, from the 1980s onwards

From the 1980s the pre-existing Mexican cartels began to gain prominence in and later control the flow of narcotics into the United

States. Over time the Mexican cartels eventually sought to vertically integrate the production and supply chain(s) for the sale of narcotics in the Americas and more latterly to the European market. The reasons behind the initial increase in the role of Mexico in both the production and trafficking of narcotics were multi-faceted, as has been noted by Chabat:

> There are many factors that explain the revival of drug trafficking in Mexico in the early 1980s. Among them we can find an increase in the production of narcotics for climatic reasons (1984 was a year with high precipitation); a greater difficulty in the spraying of the drug plantations with herbicides (there were more cloudy days which obstructed the operation); great ingenuity on the part of peasants who learned to plant poppy in a very dispersed way; an increasing incapacity and poor administration in the Mexican bureaucracy in charge of the fight against drug trafficking; the resurgence of Colombia as a major producer of cocaine, which increased the importance of Mexico as a point of transit for drugs on the way to the United States; the deterioration of the Mexican economy, which made it more attractive for peasants to cultivate narcotics; the corruption of Mexican forces in charge of the antidrug campaign; and the deterioration of this campaign as a result of the bureaucratic inertia of the Mexican offices involved (Chabat in Bagley and Walker 1995, 376-377).

The Mexican state consequently faced a combination of Colombian drug dealers and a new breed of Mexican *traficantes* who were willing to use whatever force was necessary in order to gain profit maximisation. This was in contrast with previous Mexican *traficantes* that had operated within the PRI-dominated political system, who worked through a cost-benefit analysis of the relative profit against instability caused along the border. This, combined with the loss of PRI dominance to the PAN of governorships of northern Mexican states in the 1980s, created a spike in violence, which would turn into a plateau (Astorga 2001).

Meanwhile within the US, political pressure from the Reagan administration increased towards the government of President Miguel de la Madrid. Indeed, US-Mexican relations in connection to the 'war on drugs' reached a new nadir with the torture and murder of DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena by traffickers in complicity with corrupt police officials in 1985. The US response was swift, as Chabat records: 'On February 17, 1985, only ten days after the disappearance of Camarena, the American government implemented the so-called second Operation Intercept' (Chabat in Bagley and Walker 1995, 378). The Camarena affair and its aftermath poisoned US-Mexican relations, but the DEA's response: '[…] made Mexican officials aware of the DEA's power not only in the United States but in Mexico as well' (Toro 1995, 31). From the late 1980s onwards US-Mexican counter-narcotics activities consequently came under the political spotlight as never before.

In 1987, President de la Madrid followed his counterpart in stating that the 'war on drugs' was a matter of national security. The issue of narcotics trafficking and corruption began to be taken seriously for the first since Operation Condor, at the highest echelons in Mexico. Meanwhile the US Congress responded to concerns over the progress being made in the fight against narcotics, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, with the enactment of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act. This had a corrosive effect on US-Mexican relations, as elsewhere in the hemisphere, through the introduction of a process of certification of individual countries' anti-narcotics programmes: '[…] the statute makes it clear that there is to be a definitive relationship between the provision of foreign assistance and positive performance on narcotics control' (Bewley-Taylor 1999, 203).

With the election, albeit controversial, of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988 a new page in bilateral relations began. Prior to Salinas, there appears to have been an understanding between *traficantes* and the Mexican

federal government until the 1980s, as noted by Reuter and Ronfeldt:

> Everything is permissible in Mexico as long as it is Mexican. The activity must be done nationalistically, it must be useful to at least part of the ruling system of elites and institutions, and it must be independent of international connections. This appears to define the upper limits of toleration. The limits are apparently breached when the activity jeopardizes the revolutionary mystique and Mexico's image at home and abroad, embarrasses Mexican leaders in power, weakens central government or party control in some significant area, or gets subordinated to non-Mexican actors (1992, 100).

By the Salinas *sexeino* (1988-1994), however, the rise of more ambitious Mexican *traficantes* and the shift of Colombian cocaine to overland routes via Mexico, contributed to a weakening of this informal arrangement. The *traficantes* became unruly and a threat to the established order, both in northern border states and the political machine in Mexico City. This counter-hegemonic force to the power of the PRI-controlled government was not an overnight occurrence, or of inorganic origin in Mexico. Rather, as Astorga (2001) expounds, it was an evolution of both political and capitalistic interests within Mexico, and in particular along the US-Mexican border region.

This process of evolution has three main phrases, the first began at the start of the twentieth century during the initial period of prohibition of narcotics within Mexico, due to both internal concerns and external pressure from the US. During this phrase, there appears to have been a direct linkage between the Mexican political class and narcotics trafficking with low levels of violence. The second era came in 1947, with the transformation of the Mexican approach with regards to narcotics, as departmental responsibility shifted from the Department of Health to the PGR. This organisational change brought with it a shift of emphasis

from harm reduction to the criminalisation of the drug trade and the involvement of the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) in the 'drugs war'. From its inception, the DFS was heavily involved in the *traficante* business, often acting as an unofficial link between the political class and *traficante* gangs. The third phrase, for Astorga, began during the late 1980s with the political weakness of the PRI, in the northern border states, combined with a rise in the strength of drug *traficantes* with smaller groupings becoming conglomerated into four major cartels: the Tijuana, the Juárez, the Sinaloa and the Gulf. Each cartel controlled (and controls) their own trafficking routes into the US, or *plazas*. Faced by the rising power of *narcotraficantes*, the Salinas administration sought to counter this, particularly the threat of *traficante* infiltration of the Mexican justice system. The 'war on drugs' consequently became concentrated around the lead agency, the PGR. Furthermore, the Salinas administration reformed the national security system in an attempt to root out narco-corruption.

In the late 1980s the US saw a boom in the crack cocaine market and alongside it, a rise in associated violence and crime.[1] Simultaneously, the geo-political reality of the Cold War ended, impacting on the 'war on drugs', as Bewley-Taylor records:

> In mid-September 1989 Secretary of Defense Cheney signaled the end of Pentagon resistance to involvement with the anti-drug campaign in the Western Hemisphere. Influenced by the dramatic changes under way in the Soviet Union and the resulting uncertain future for the US military in a post- of Cold War world, Cheney declared that 'detecting and countering the production and trafficking illegal drugs is a high-priority national security mission for the Pentagon' (1999, 191).

1) Crack cocaine or freebase cocaine are the street names for methylbenzoylecgonine, produced via the chemical conversion of cocaine hydrochloride (powder cocaine) and baking soda.

The military-industrial complex and political class of the US found a new bogey man to replace the Kremlin - drug kingpins. During the 1990s under President George Bush Snr. (elected in 1988) no re-formulation of the 'war on drugs' was deemed necessary. Indeed, the process of militarisation continued in the region, with a new programme of expansion of aid, notably military aid, to the Andean region, while also creating new rules of engagement for the US military in the fight against narcotics (Carpenter 2003, 37). This programme, entitled the Andean Initiative was announced in September 1989 and was seen in the US as a political response to the assassination of Colombian presidential candidate, Luis Carlos Galán on 18 August 1989. Though the Initiative was established prior to the assassination, it provided a convenient pretext for the anti-drugs programme. This new push for action on narcotics, led to the invasion of Panama in 1990 in order to remove from power General Manuel Noriega, a drug trafficker and former CIA operative.

The role of the military in combating narcotics, was emphasized by the Pentagon via the engagement of low-intensity conflicts throughout the Andean region. The US military was perceived as an appropriate instrument.

The 1990s, however, did experience progress in the fight against the cartels in Colombia, with the killing of infamous kingpin, Pablo Escobar. Escobar's assassination, along with the deaths and imprisonment of other cartel members, led to a diminishing role of the Cali and Medellín cartels within the Colombian drug industry, as it increasingly fractured into a plethora of producers and traffickers. The increase in anti-narcotics programmes in the Andean region also saw traffickers (and to a lesser extent, producers) move into Mexico. As a result by the 1990s, narcotics trafficking (and to a lesser extent production) had not only become a serious law-and-order issue for Mexico, but had become a major industry within the economies of several states.

The election of President William 'Bill' Clinton in 1992, saw a continuation of the policy of militarisation in the context of the 'war on drugs', notably in the Andean region, although Mexico was not immune to this policy either. Indeed, the country's own politicians sought to use the military in counter-narcotics long before US intervention in this regard. The 1990s consequently witnessed an increase in bilateral activity between the two neighbours' militaries and wider security apparatus.

Mexico was and is, however, plagued by high levels of corruption, from the police officer on the streets of Nuevo Laredo to the highest government officials, the most infamous case being that of Mexico's very own drugs czar, General Gutiérrez Rebello, who was found guilty of taking bribes from the Carrillo Fuentes organisation (or Juárez Cartel) in 1997. The matter was made even more embrassing by the words of the then US drug czar, General Barry McCaffery commenting on the appointment of General Gutiérrez Rebello: 'He has a reputation for impeccable integrity [···] He's a deadly serious guy' (quoted in Carpenter 2003, 178).

The 1990s also saw a shift in the nature and scale of the trafficking of cocaine from Colombia. Where previously Mexican gangs had simply charged a fee of around US$1000 to US$2000 per kilogram, in the 1990s they began to request payment in kind instead. This was the consequence of two main factors. Firstly, it was a consequence of increasingly leading role played by the US military from 1989 onwards in drug induction. As a result, the flow of drugs via the Caribbean Basin was stemmed via the input of greater resources and the development of the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S).[2] Consequently, the narcotics cartels sought to find new trading routes to the US via Mexico. Secondly,

2) Speech by Rear Admiral Jeff Hathway, Head of Joint Inter-Agency Task Force South at 'Charting New Approaches to Defense and Security Challenges in the Western Hemisphere' Conference, Coral Glabes, FL, 9-11 March 2005.

Mexican traffickers gained a foothold in the US wholesale and retail cocaine market, increasing their profit margins by five to ten fold (*New York Times*, 11 July 1997, A1, A10, A11).

Against this backdrop, the Salinas administration's (1988-1994) approach to relations with its northern neighbour in the 'war on drugs' appears to have been Janus faced. Whilst, it encouraged greater cooperation between the two countries' security apparatus in order to politically justify the signing of a free trade agreement, elements of the government and military (even including the President's brother, Raúl Salinas de Gortari), maintained links with the Juárez Cartel. Indeed, there were even rumours of linkages between the Mexican President himself and the drug cartels (*New York Times*, 11 July 1997, A1, A10, A11).

American officials, nevertheless, played down the possibility of such high level corruption, instead favouring to highlight the cooperation amongst law enforcement agencies. In 1993, the Salinas administration chose to decline US military assistance in favour of a policy of the 'Mexicanisation' of the drugs war (GAO 1996, 12). Through this initiative, Mexican authorities shifted their emphasis from attempting to interdict drugs and diminish the flow of drugs, to a policy concentrating on detaining *traficante* kingpins. This paid greater importance to the political stability of Mexico and the government's control of its territory than to reducing drug flows into the US market. As a result of this development, US-Mexican relations during the early 1990s appeared more akin to a chess game rather than neighbours seeking mutual ends.

The election of Ernesto Zedillo in 1994, failed to bring a sea change in the Mexican government's approach to the 'war on drugs'. Like his predecessors, Zedillo declared narcotics a national threat and set about readjusting the security apparatus, removing corrupt elements. Despite the rhetoric, however, the level of profit in the narcotics trade was such that corruption remained endemic, as traffickers' traditional methodology

of '*plato o plomo*' ('sliver or lead') proved effective.[3] As Academic Interviewee 2 notes:

> [···] I think you would have corruption whether it [the Mexican military] was less or more hierarchical. I think it has more to do with the power drug traffickers exert both monetary and physical. I think it is very difficult to resist when you are the potential victim [···].[4]

Meanwhile, the US government became increasingly preoccupied by possible instability in Mexico, originating both from leftist guerrillas as well as narcotics related violence and corruption.[5] US government concern led to the covert establishment of the Center for Anti-Narcotics Investigations, also known by its Spanish initials, CIAN. The CIAN consisted of approximately ninety young officers of the Mexican Army, trained by the CIA, as a special forces wing of the Mexican Army's Intelligence Section, *Sección 2* (*New York Times*, 11 July 1997, A10).[6] Likewise, with reference to the Zapatista movement, the US military covertly formulated the 47th Company or CO47 (Jordan 2001, 146).[7] In a parallel development, from late-1995, the US intelligence community's

3) Recording failed, aide memoir notes: 'Drugs are not corrupting in themselves, any large cash producing industries corruptible'. Interview, NGO Official 2, 19 February 2004.

4) Interviewed by author, 18 April 2005.

5) 'The US-Mexican border is virtually undefended by the military forces [···] if there were instability in Mexico the requirements to defend the border would be extraordinary [···] The US' ability to project power elsewhere depends on a secure border with Canada, with Mexico, and in the Caribbean which is why Cuba is such a difficult issue [···] so the southern border is very important'. Interview, Academic Interviewee 1, 9 February 2004.

6) This was unofficially confirmed by Federal Government Officials 6 and 9, 31 March 2004.

7) This was unofficially confirmed by Federal Government Officials 6 and 9, 31 March 2004.

Linear Committee, which coordinated US law enforcement, intelligence agencies and military in the finding of weak linkages in the production and trafficking of cocaine (*New York Times*, 11 July 1997, A10).

In October 1995 Secretary of Defense William Perry became the first serving Defense Secretary to officially visit Mexico. His aim, was to bring the Mexican military's top brass 'on board' and persuade them to accept aid, which they were previously unwilling to do. This military assistance was intended to have a dual function: fighting the 'war on drugs', and to counter the Zapatista insurgency in Chiapas. With this in mind, a second bi-national meeting of officials was arranged for December 1995 in San Antonio, Texas and as a result of these talks, a formal agreement of understanding on future military transfers was signed, leading to US military assistance to Mexico mushrooming from virtually nil to US$62 million. Within months, Mexican troops began to be trained within US military educational institutions. Notably, Mexican personnel were set to Fort Bragg for special forces instruction in order to create the GAFEs (*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*), to become the Mexican army's spearhead counter-narcotics force. Paradoxically, about a third of these soldiers would later be turned by the Gulf Cartel and form the backbone of the Zetas enforcement gang.

Despite considerable assistance and aid from Washington, the control of Mexican territory by *traficantes* grew. The extent of their power came to light in 1997, when Mexico's drug czar, Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was charged with accepting bribes from Amado Carillo Fuentes (aka "Lord of the Skies"). Indeed, Gutiérrez states in interviews that Carillo Fuentes had had up to three meetings with military top brass officials in order to negotiate a peaceful agreement to 'normalise' the narcotics trade (*New York Times*, 11 July 1997, A11). Carillo Fuentes died during plastic surgery 5 July 1997.

To a backdrop of such high levels of bloodshed, the military top brass

and *Los Pinos*, together with the US administration, maintained their faith in the continuing militarisation of the 'drugs war'. Confirmation of US policy came with the announcement of Plan Colombia in 2000. The Clinton administration was locking both the US military and regional governments into a continuation of the previous failed policies.

2000 proved a dramatic year with the election of President Vicente Fox, the first non-PRI president of Mexico for over seventy years. While this caused reverberations in Mexican politics, civil-military relations remained good, as the military apparatus and top brass maintained their loyalty to the presidency rather than the PRI. This was in no small part due to the modernisation progress undertaken by the previous Zedillo administration.

During the 2000 presidential election campaign, Vicente Fox and the PAN had argued in favour of the removal of the military from policing operations, most notably the 'war on drugs'. Once in power the Fox administration, quickly undertook a *volte face* on this issue. Not only were existing military mobilisations maintained, the government sought to increase the depth and speed of militarisation. Within days of entering office, the new government appears to have come under pressure from Washington to maintain Zedillo's policy of militarisation. This occurred alongside pressure from elements within the Mexican security apparatus. The 'war on drugs' (and with it the militarisation of civilian security services) intensified as President Fox appointed top brass into titular positions in the Attorney General's Office. Not only was General Marcial Rafael Macedo de la Concha the Attorney General, junior officers were also placed throughout the organisation. Indeed, the Fox administration sought to reform the security apparatus of the country in the face of continuing fears of corruption within the Mexican criminal justice system. These organisational adjustments aimed at stemming the tide of *narcotraficante* related corruption within the criminal justice system.

While civilian law enforcement became increasingly militarised in the fight against drugs, the military continued to pay a major role in its own right. Upon Fox's election, the Mexican navy sought to reform its organisational structures and posture of its forces, in notable juxtaposition to the SEDENA. Academic Interviewee 2 comments on this:

> [···] There have been some significant changes [···] the Navy has been completely revamped and revised, and a number of Admirals have been retired if something like that had happen in any other military in Latin America, there would probably have been a military revolt. So [···] I think Mexico is very unique and the fact you could accomplish that with a junior Admiral taking over is quite extraordinary.[8)]

In terms of US-Mexican relations, the navy has therefore acted as a spearhead for greater cooperation, as symbolised by the use of Mexican naval vessels as training camps for US mobile training teams in order to circumvent concerns about national sovereignty.[9)] US officials perceive the Mexican navy at an organisational level as more transparent and easier to work with than their SEDENA counterparts.[10)] US officials

8) Interviewed by author, 18 April 2005.

9) Recording failed, aide memoir notes: '[Interviewee] goes to Mexico and Guatemala to train military, both navy and army'. Interview, Academic Interviewee 5, 19 April 2005.
'The navies do do [sic] stuff together [···] well, maybe its closer to our coastguard [···] they have found ways of working together and do on both coasts very effectively [···] the beauty of that is that it is over the horizon by in large, its not terribly visible [···] that's not something you can do with the army and the air force that are part of Defensa'. Interview, Military Official 1, 12 February 2004.

10) '[···] You have got to make a distinction between Defensa and Marina, what you able to do with Marina hundreds of miles out at seas [···] the navy is far more flexible, they want to interact not only with the US but

thus find it easier to identify with the Mexican navy than SEDENA, which is perceived as secretive (which fuels suspicion), top-heavy and ineffectual as a fighting force. Bilateral relations between the US and Mexican defence establishments has increased markedly since the mid-1990s, following President Zedillo's pronouncement of the Azteca directive (the return of a continual anti-narcotics campaign) and the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, with the resultant internationalisation of the low-intensity conflict in the southern state. As Military Official 1 notes:

> [···] When the Zapatistas had just come on the scene and the Mexican army was not having an easy time [···] in the south of Mexico [···] the Mexicans looked to us [the US military] to see if we could help them and [General] Sullivan made quite an effort to help them and that was really appreciated and the relationship between these two [Generals] was extremely solid that facilitated some things happening, that do not happen before in our relationship [···]. [11]

While initially, the counternarcotics and the counter-insurgency missions may appear incongruous, they utilise much of the same materiel and tactics, though to different ends. The involvement of the Mexican military in counternarcotics operations is at the behest of the President. Mexican military officers would prefer not to be involved, as they wish to preserve the positive public reputation of the military. Officers fear that as a result of '*plato o plomo*', and the vast sums involved in trafficking, the good name of the military could come under question. Military involvement is due to the civilian authorities' inability to cope with the infiltration and strength of the organised drug gangs, rather than a desire

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also with other countries [···] Defensa are very conservative and hasn't changed a great deal [···]'. Interview, Military Official 1, 12 February 2004.

11) Interviewed by author, 12 February 2004.

for greater operational scope. The Mexican military are consequently caught in a dilemma through their entry into the 'war on drugs': while it opens them to the possibility of corruption, if they had shunned involvement they would have been corrupted by proxy, leading eventually to a 'narco-democracy' (Jordan 2001).

The most important impact of the *narcotraficantes* has been the extreme levels of violence conducted by the drug cartels' *sicarios* (hitmen), combined with the militarisation of the narco gangs, referred to by Mexican media as 'narco-soliders'. This is a reference to their core membership being ex-Mexican Special Forces (GAFEs) or Guatemalan Special Forces (*Kabiles*). The drug gangs have also developed their own training camps within their respective '*plazas*'. They are seen as a mercenary accoutrement by the repective cartels and even have mobile training units akin to the US military. From the beginning of the 2000s, *narcotraficantes* began to use force, not only to protect and expand their position in the drug *plazas* to the US, but also to exact extortion payments from businesses within their sphere of influence. This created an atmosphere of fear and a wall of silence, behind which the cartels could operate in border towns, thus reducing the effective sovereignty of the Mexican state: the police, both state and local, were systemically bribed or killed by the cartels, or alternatively left their posts (*The Times*, 1 September 2008, 2).

The Fox administration's response to this escalating narco-violence was to intensify the military's role in the fight against trafficking gangs. As in previous administrations, the civilian law enforcement bodies became increasingly infiltrated by the cartels, even after re-structuring. Likewise, state and local departments suffered from high levels of corruption and intimidation, particularly in border towns. The result was the federalisation of policing in some areas as part of 'Operation Safe Mexico'. Undeterred, the *narcotraficantes* continued with their programme of violence.

Drug violence saw a notable increase post 2001, not resulting from

the election of Vicente Fox, but from escape of the head of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín 'El Chapo' ('Shorty') Guzmán in a prison laundry van. During the early 2000s the Fox administration concentrated its efforts on the Arellano Félix Organisation (AFO), also known as the Tijuana Cartel, managing to kill one brother and arresting another in 2002, this led to a relative decline in the power and sphere of influence of this organisation in relation to the Sinaloa Cartel. As a result the Sinaloa Cartel, also known as '*La Alizana de Sangre*', grew in confidence. Against this backdrop, the cartel sought to extend its operations to the border town of Nuevo Laredo, in competition with the Gulf Cartel. The resultant competition was predictably violent. The Gulf Cartel's enforcement unit, *Los Zetas* and the Sinaloa Cartel's *sicarios*, *Los Negros* fought open battles in the streets of Nuevo Laredo. Simultaneously, *Los Zetas* sought to exterminate the much smaller *traficante* gangs in Nuevo Laredo, *Los Chacos* and *Los Tejas*. The willingness to use violence, even against innocents, saw *Los Zetas* prevail in a war of attrition during the Fox *sexeino*.

This realignment produced a reaction from the state. The military changed its focus towards the Gulf Cartel, and particularly the instability caused by the *Los Zetas*, as the AFO threat comparatively diminished. In March 2003, similar to what occurred to the Arellano Félix brothers and 'El Chapo' before him, the Mexican state caught up with Osiel Cardenas. Cardenas found himself in federal jail, though under lax conditions, which allowed him to continue his operations from his cell. As this incongruous situation suggests, for all the efforts of the Mexican government, drug related violence along with the flow of associated narcotics continued unabated. To compound matters, in a case of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', for both the Tijuana and Gulf Cartels sought to infringe upon the market of the Sinaloa Cartel resulting in a further increase in the level of violence.

Events in Mexico's border region made little impact on the US polity except in those communities on the doorstep of the gangland violence at the time. Behind the scenes, however, state level authorities became increasingly concerned about the *narcotraficante* threat to the citizens of the region, although officials sought to downplay the violence in public. As State Government Official 1 confirmed: '[…] Drug lord fights […] those are the issues that concern to us […] the Zetas, the ex-Mexican commandos […] caused problems along the border'.[12)]

The question this prompts is: why did US federal authorities adopt this stance vis-à-vis drug-related violence along the Mexican border? The reasoning behind this relaxed, at worst complacent, attitude has multiple possible causations. One thesis is that the downplaying of *narcotraficante* violence was simply a manifestation of a bureaucratic desire not to highlight on the palpable failure of the 'drug war' and the related instability of the US-Mexican border region, as well as the continued prevalence of drugs within both societies. This inertia reflects an element of bureaucratic self-preservation, and justification for Congressional appropriations and political influence within individual bureaucracies and the wider government.[13)]

An alternative explanation for official virtual silence on the violence in the border region is that US officials did not wish to exacerbate regional instability by aggravating Mexican authorities or inflaming nationalistic sensibilities on both side of the border. A third argument holds that wider geopolitical concerns determine the position of the US government: US officials maintain a rhetorical low profile in relation to drug related violence

12) Interviewed by author, 24 March 2005.

13) General Hill, CINC of SOUTHCOM at 'Hemispheric Strategic Objectives for the Next Decade' Conference, 17-19 March 2004, memoir aide notes: 'Armed forces part of the solution instead of the problem […] transformation of armed forces to co-operate with law enforcement to meet transnational threats of narcoterrorism'.

in the border region in order to preserve the geopolitical status quo. In practice, this meant a preference in Washington for posting US military personnel overseas rather than along the border. Another possible explanation behind the apparent reticence of officials to constructively act during the Fox *sexeino*, may simply be an inability of the White House administration (namely President Bush and Vice-President Cheney) to forgive the Fox administration, both for its decision to exit from the Rio Treaty and lack of support for the Iraq War. This may appear petty, but the US President and Vice-President were, apparently, enraged by the actions of the Fox administration.[14)]

In all probability a combination of these explanations apply to varying degrees within the different bureaucracies of both governments. In the long-term view of US-Mexican security relations, institutional inter- and intra-relations are key to the formulation in accordance with their own identities and subsequent interests. However, vis-à-vis the Bush-Fox relationship, personal chemistry appears to have been central to determining the warp and weft of bilateral ties.

Washington's approach, whatever the reasoning, appears in hindsight to have cut off the US government's nose to spite its face, as drug related violence has accelerated simultaneously with the influence of *Los Zetas* spreading north. Furthermore, Mexican cartels increasingly appear to be moving into the US retail drug market. The cartels have also managed to circumvent US border controls, by producing the bulky narcotic, marijuana, in the US itself. Additionally, some cartels are operating large-scale crystal meth laboratories within the US in remote farms and outbuildings, as the precursor chemicals are freely available on the open market. The continuing 'war on drugs' and the high levels of ingenuity of *traficantes*, together with a willingness to use violence undermine

14) NGO Interviewee 9 and NGO Interviewee 10, Interviewed by author, 16 February 2004.

law-and-order, and consequently the sovereignty of both countries. Beyond the Fox administration, the drugs war continues to de-stabilise Mexico and corruption continues to weaken the institutions of the country to combat the threat.

After Felipe Calderón's contested election in 2006, he sought to continue a tradition amongst Mexican presidents to restructure the country's security apparatus, alongside declarations related to the national security threat from narcotics *traficantes*. Furthermore, Calderón's victory confirmed the political dominance of the PAN relative to the PRI. Indeed, the fact the Calderón came to power on a campaign that emphasised the need to curb the influence of *traficantes* and to bring about a reduction in the level of violence besetting the country, ironically appears to have encouraged an upsurge in violence. Calderón's approach to the 'war on drugs' has shifted from that of Fox, that flooded areas of instability with police and military personnel as shown in Operation Safe Mexico. The new administration sought not to simply attack kingpins but rather cartels' networks and their money trail.

Calderón also appears more willing than previous Mexican leaders, to cooperate with US government policymakers and bureaucracy in a frank and open fashion. Indeed, the President has already castigated the low level of US government support to Mexico in public, while the Mexican Attorney, General Eduardo Medina Mora, has criticised Washington's lack of action on gun control and demand-side programmes. This out-spoken behaviour is remarkable from Mexican officials, especially of such high rank, given the country's historic diplomatic support for the notion of non-intervention and national sovereignty. Additionally, Calderón has relied heavily on the use of the military in the 'war on drugs', due to the continued infiltration of the criminal justice system. This process of militarisation has led to critics warning that Calderón's no-nonsense approach will result in 'Colombianisation'. Such notions

are given an element of credence with Mexico's signing of a US$1.4 billion programme of assistance with the US government, called the Merida Initiative, which critics have labelled 'Plan Mexico'. Unlike Plan Colombia, however, the central emphasis of Plan Mexico is on the professionalisation and resourcing of law enforcement agencies in Mexico and the US, rather than funding military operations or units. As the *Joint Statement on the Merida Initiative: a New Paradigm for Security Cooperation* states: 'The Merida Initiative will build on specific activities that aim **1)** bolster Mexican domestic enforcement efforts, **2)** bolster US domestic enforcement efforts; and **3)** expand bilateral and regional cooperation that addresses transnational crime' (US Department of State, October 2007). Though, no acknowledgment of the militarization of Mexico's law enforcement agencies is made.

Plan Mexico aims to achieve the ultimate prize for the Mexican state, namely creating a professional law enforcement agency that values its duty to the country over bribes and kickbacks. Faced with this threat, members of the Calderón administration have recently come under direct attack from *traficante* hitmen. Yet Calderón appears to have the political will to continue his fight against the cartels. The policies of the Calderón administration therefore seem to have only exacerbated matters, for as the Mexican state attacks one cartel, another cartel simply takes over.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the 'drugs war' continues to play a crucial role in US-Mexican relations, particularly security relations. Indeed, the US-Mexican borderlands have in recent times become a key battleground that is unwinnable in the long term. The US approach, has changed with the zeitgeist of the nation at a particular conjuncture and the interests

of the political class. This is not to argue in favour of a single causal relationship, rather that there is a multiplicity of interests in constant flux. While some authors may hold that there is a causal relationship between, say, the domestic political interests of the Republican Party in the late 1960s and the 'war on drugs', others argue in favour of a causal link between the neo-imperial desires of the US capitalist class and the 'war' (Baum 1997; Carpenter 2003). It seems more accurate to argue that the 'war' on narcotics, from a US perspective, has multiple threads of embedded interests within its formulation through to the present day. These ebb and flow in relative importance over time within a thread of common interest in the continuation of the 'war' as facts on the ground change.

The interests from different sectors of the US polity have and do coincide to enable the continuation of the 'war on drugs', though it should be noted that the social construction of the 'war' is not static, as differing interests come to the fore so it evolves.

Since the end of the Cold War era the 'war on drugs', both in US domestic and foreign policies, has followed an increasingly regressive approach of criminalisation and securitisation, coinciding with embedded self-interests within the political system and government bureaucracy. These interests are served by the rhetoric of a 'drugs war' to enact specific strategies in reaction to proscribed prohibition. Social constructivism argues that the prohibition of drugs is not solely a prohibition enforced for the betterment of society and individuals - the enactment and enforcement of prohibition of narcotics, in reality, occurs for multiple underlying interests that in turn seek to enforce the 'war'.

With reference to the latter day formulation of US policy, the capitalist class interests fused with suburban white middle class concerns over the perceived threat from poor blacks in US inner cities. In consequence, the nature of the enforcement of prohibition has had an effect on the

social constructs of race and class along with urban and rural identities, and in turn on the interests of the political and capitalist class in relation to the wider zeitgeist of the country. Consequently, the 'war on drugs', is a conflict that has no conceivable ending.

Similarly, Mexican drugs policy is socially constructed via a prism of multiple interests and numerous social actors. The political and capitalist classes within Mexico, unlike the US, have attempted, historically, to co-opt narcotics production in an effort to delimit instability. As a result, Mexican cooperation has largely been in name alone, concentrating on appeasing its northern neighbour, although, on occasion personal moral dislike of narcotics has led presidents to enact genuine counter-narcotics programmes. Up until the 1980s, the interests of the political and capitalist classes did not coincide with a 'war'. However, in the 1980s, as the PRI's political machine lost its hold on the northern states, this coincided with the rise a new breed of *traficante* that were more willing to use violent means (Astorga 2001). The emergence of these new social actors has led the Mexican business and political elite to forge greater ties with Washington. The concerns and identities of Mexican social actors evolved with reference to internal political considerations rather than solely the appeasement of Washington policymakers. The Mexican state in the post-PRI era bases its policy of opposing the growing power of *traficantes* on two main factors. First, there is the impact of a growing internal drug market, as Mexico became flooded with drugs heading to the US, with the resultant human consequences. Second, the extreme level of violence used by the enforcement gangs is disproportionate and deliberately so, in order to create an aura of fear. The extreme level of violence, both in terms of frequency and intensity, question the legitimacy of the Mexican state in its primary role to defend the realm and its citizenry. Latterly the elite's interests have coincided with Washington, in the continuing militarization. Yet the level of violence

does not appear to be dissipating, for as the tactics and strategy of the prohibitionist state evolves, so in turn do those of drug cartels. Indeed, it could be argued that it may be in the interests of the capitalist and political classes to maintain the 'war on drugs' as a justification for the militarization of the security apparatus and use of counter-insurgency tactics on Mexico's urban poor in order to maintain their social control.

Attempts to humanise the on-going 'war' are daunting, as at its core lay the transformation of US elite interests and identity as embodied within the political discourse of the country. While such a project may appear impossible, there is an alternative, if the political will existed to socially construct it- *si, se puede* (yes, we can).

Abstract

This article examines the evolving nature of the 'war on drugs' and its connections to US-Mexican bilateral security relations, seeking to enable the reader to understand the socio-political context of the on-going war on drugs in Mexico.

The article discusses the changing nature of the US and Mexican responses to the 'war' as vested interests of the respective elite classes evolve. This is particularly evident in post-1980s Mexico, as the ruling PRI lost its grip on the reigns of power both at local and state level in the North of the country to the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*). It was during this period that the flow of narcotics, notably cocaine increased via Mexico into its North American neighbour. This combined with an increased readiness by drug cartels to use violence both amongst themselves and against agents of the Mexican state. As a result, from the 1980s to the present day, the level of violence experienced in the North of the country has steadily increased as its ties to the corporate model implemented by the PRI are severed and Mexico moves towards a more democratic model of governance.

However, the states failure to provide a dominant reason d'etat and implement law and order has led to increased level of violence, which has moved from the northern border region and now is present throughout the country. Having previously been reliant on the Mexican military to abate the problem, the Mexican state is struggling to contain the threat posed by the drug cartels.

Key Words: US, Mexico, Narcotics, Social Constructivism, Drugs War / 미국, 멕시코, 마약, 사회적 구성주의, 마약과의 전쟁

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