What's Spanish for Quagmire?

Five myths that caused the failed war next door.

BY JORGE G. CASTAÑEDA | JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

Mexico's current government took office on Dec. 1, 2006, but really only assumed power 10 days later, when Felipe Calderón, winner of a close presidential election that his leftist opponent petulantly refused to concede, donned a military jacket, declared an all-out war on organized crime and drug trafficking, and ordered the Mexican army out of its barracks and into the country's streets, highways, and towns. The bold move against odious adversaries (and change of topic) garnered Calderón broad support from the public and the international community, along with raised eyebrows among Mexico's political, business, and intellectual elites.

Three years and 15,000 deaths later, Calderón's war still commands support at home and backing from abroad, mainly from Barack Obama’s administration, though skepticism about the Mexican president's strategy is spreading, as Rubén Aguilar and I discovered when we published El Narco: La Guerra Pálida last fall and found ourselves in the middle of a vigorous debate about where our country is headed. It is long overdue.

The Mexican drug war is costly, unwinnable, and predicated on dangerous myths. Calderón has deployed everything from distorted statistics to bad history as weapons to convince the country, and the world, that the war must be joined.

As Americans are painfully aware, wars predicated on false pretenses that pursue ill-defined aims usually turn into regrettable quagmires. Mexico is still far from being a failed state, but it is already entangled in a failed war. Until and

unless it abandons the false narrative of the war as the necessary defense of a desperate land besieged by bad guys, it will be in serious danger of becoming one.

1. Mexico’s Druggie Explosion

The Mexican government contends it had to deploy tens of thousands of soldiers to take on the drug cartels as never before in part to keep drugs away from Mexico’s children. The argument behind this emotionally powerful rallying cry is that Mexico went from being simply a transit point and producer of drugs to being their consumer.

Mexico has been producing marijuana and heroin for export to the United States for decades; it does not produce cocaine but has been the main conduit from Colombia to the United States since the late 1980s. Over the past decade, it became a significant manufacturer of methamphetamine, also for sale in the United States. But now the government claims that Mexicans have started consuming drugs and that this must be stopped before Mexico City ends up like inner-city Baltimore.

The government’s case is undermined, however, by its own statistics. Mexico’s health ministry has been carrying out national addiction surveys across the country since 1988; the studies constitute a reliable and constant series of data collected by the same specialists in the same places. The most recent survey shows that there has been no significant increase in the number of users in Mexico. The total went from 307,000 to 465,000 addicts between 2002 and 2008 -- an increase of 26,000 addicts per year in a country of 110 million inhabitants. The overall addiction rate amounts to 0.4 percent of the population, far lower than the rate in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, and lower also than in other Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile. The number of Mexicans admitting that they had consumed specific drugs at least once in their lives -- the so-called incidence rate -- has also remained stable or even declined for all drugs over the past decade. The prevalence of drug use -- that is, the number of people who confessed to consuming any drug at least once over the previous year -- has remained stable.

These findings are corroborated by other surveys, for example, those carried out by the National Psychiatry Institute, and at the regional level by the Centros de Integración Juvenil. These figures show that in the country’s largest urban centers, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, as well as in border towns wracked by violence like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, there is absolutely no evidence pointing to any meaningful increase in drug use, notwithstanding the considerable expansion of Mexico’s middle class in recent years. The figures for Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez are especially noteworthy: From 1998 to 2005, the addiction rate in Tijuana fell from 4.4 percent to 3.3 percent; even in Ciudad Juárez, supposedly the narco capital of the world, it rose from 1.6 percent to just 4 percent.

2. Mexico’s Violence Explosion

The second rationale given for Calderón’s war was the increase in violence leading up to and throughout 2006, and the notion that organized crime’s mayhem was undermining public safety, not to mention the rule of law. Gory cartel-on-cartel violence in the second half of that year, including the appearance of five decapitated heads in a disco in Uruapan, in Calderón’s home state of Michoacán, had shocked society, and the new administration made much of campaign polls showing that security and violence ranked highest among the electorate’s concerns.

Unfortunately, this rationale is also belied by the facts. Violence in Mexico, measured by murders per 100,000 inhabitants, had been falling in the previous decade -- according to the government’s own statistics, which Calderón himself has quoted. According to U.N. data, the murder rate had fallen from 14.9 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1998 to less
than 11 in 2006. This was higher than in the United States (5.6), but considerably lower than in much of the rest of Latin America, including El Salvador (58), Venezuela (48), Colombia (37), and Brazil (25).

People in Mexico may have felt more insecure when they elected Calderón, but in fact they were living in a significantly less violent and crime-prone country than a decade earlier.

The confusion separating perception from reality springs from a misreading of public-opinion surveys. Mexicans in 2006 were more concerned about ordinary crime and law and order than anything else, partly because financial worries had diminished in the wake of 11 years of macro-economic stability and modest but persistent growth. But they did not associate that concern with cartels, organized crime, or drug trafficking. In poll after poll, these issues ranked very low among Mexicans’ preoccupations. Indeed, violence directly linked to the drug business really exploded only after Calderón took office: In 2006, 2,100 drug-related killings took place; in 2007 the number rose to 2,700; in 2008 to 5,660; and in 2009, through late November, to 5,800.

3. The Besieged State

The third rationale for the declaration of war was the specter of the Mexican government being "captured" -- at local, state, and even national levels -- by all-powerful cartels. This argument appears more credible than Calderón’s other claims; a growing number of episodes seemed to prove that the cartels were taking over cities, highways, and ports of entry to the United States, charging for protection, putting entire police forces on their payroll, and so on. The Mexican state, Calderón told the country, was losing control of its territory.

Once again, though, the argument is undercut by the government’s own repeated assertions, with the Obama administration’s backing, that Mexico was not a "failed state." It wasn’t and isn’t, but one can hardly make the two cases simultaneously: that is, on the one hand, that Mexico is not a failed state, and, on the other, that it is losing control of its territory.

A dose of historical context also undermines the notion that the cartels all of a sudden threatened to infiltrate and corrupt the Mexican government. Mexico is not Norway, and never was. In the 1980s, the entire Federal Security Directorate was disbanded because it had been completely taken over by the drug cartels. The U.S. ambassador at the time, John Gavin, specifically accused several state governors and cabinet members of drug trafficking in private conversations with President Miguel de la Madrid, a charge de la Madrid considered, in some cases, "excessive."

In 1998, President Ernesto Zedillo’s newly appointed drug czar, Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was arrested barely two months after being appointed, when U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey, after first applauding Gutiérrez Rebollo, discovered that his Mexican counterpart worked for the cartels.

The Calderón administration’s declaration of war against the cartels and its narrative of local governments at risk of being captured by organized crime presupposed that the cartels’ penetration of such governments, as well as of the police and army, must have been much greater in 2006 than over the previous 30 years. Unfortunately for Mexico, history makes clear that this is a dubious proposition. Although violence and the capture of certain prerogatives of statehood by the cartels today may be greater than in mid-2006, the issue is what came first: the war or the ascent of the cartels. Calderón argues that the growing threat of the cartels drove him to war; I believe that the failed war has led to the cartels’ greater power.
4. The Gun Dealer Next Door

Calderón has argued persistently that Washington shares responsibility for the drug war because of its bad-neighborly ways. The Mexican government accuses the United States of being its enemy’s indispensable weapons supplier, ascribing a significant part of today’s violence south of the Rio Grande to the Second Amendment of the Constitution in effect north of that river.

A large proportion of the assault weapons used by the cartels do come from the United States, but the figure is far lower than the oft-quoted 90 percent (90 percent of the guns Mexican authorities give to U.S. authorities to trace turn out to be from the United States -- but better estimates suggest 20 to 35 percent of guns in Mexico are American) or the also oft-quoted claim that 2,000 assault rifles cross into Mexico every day. If true, this would mean that more than 2 million weapons have entered Mexico just since Calderón has been in office. To put it into context, Mexico has an average of 15 guns per 100 inhabitants. Finland has 55.

Global statistics suggest that sharing a border with the United States means little in terms of the availability and price of assault weapons, as the favelados of Brazil, the peasants in Colombia, or the armless children in Sierra Leone may tell you. Mexican authorities would be wise to accept this reality, as the cost to legitimize trade and tourism of clamping down and scrutinizing all north-south border flows would be immense, and the effort, if pursued, would be futile. If there is one type of shadowy merchandise that is almost as easy to purchase on the world market as drugs, it is weaponry.

5. The Neighbors Can Break Their Drug Habit

This fifth myth also binds the United States to Calderón’s war and reflects the Mexican lament that if only Americans would curb their appetite for illicit drugs, or truly clamp down on their consumption, Mexico’s situation would improve. This, too, is a quixotic fantasy.

U.S. drug consumption has not diminished over the past decade, and there is no reason to think it will in the future. What changes over time are the types of drugs consumed, the sectors of society that consume them, and the geographical location of their consumption. But American society will never reduce its overall demand for drugs, because it simply does not wish to; and it does not because, quite rightly, it does not believe that the cost of doing so is worth bearing.

If anything, the United States seems to be moving in the opposite direction; that is, toward decriminalization of marijuana, greater tolerance for safer forms of heroin, an effort to wean people off methamphetamines, and in general, the adoption of a far more relaxed attitude toward drugs. Hence the Obama administration’s decision not to enforce federal anti-marijuana laws in states with legalized “medical” marijuana.

It is absurd for hundreds of Mexican soldiers, police officers, and petty drug dealers to be dying over the drug war in Tijuana when, 100 or so miles to the north in Los Angeles, there are, as the New York Times reported recently, more legal and public dispensaries of marijuana than public schools.

If you accept these myths as truths, it would be possible to remain optimistic about Mexico’s war. The Calderón administration sporadically publishes statistics on seizures of drugs, chemicals for methamphetamine production, weapons, airplanes, boats, trucks, and even semisubmersible submarines -- the drug war equivalent of body counts -- all

at far higher rates than those announced by previous presidents. It also claims that the best proof of the war’s success lies in the higher price of several drugs on U.S. streets, like methamphetamines and cocaine.

In this narrative, almost anything can become a metric of “success.” The Calderón government even maintains that the dramatic growth in the number of drug-linked killings in Mexico from 2007 to 2009 should be attributed to victories achieved in the war against the cartels; these unfortunate deaths, it claims, mean that the criminal organizations are killing each other in desperation as the army closes in.

The government has continued the two previous administrations’ policy of building a national police force, so far without greater success than either Ernesto Zedillo or Vicente Fox, and is said to be pursuing a strategy of sealing off access to Mexico from the south of the country at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the 137-mile narrow waist of Mexico that is much easier to patrol than the border with Guatemala and Belize.

But these claims, like the myths that led Mexico to war in the first place, are easily debunked. Colombia offers Mexico painful lessons on the need to crack down on the drug business’s collateral damage-violence, corruption, kidnappings, extortion, and so on—as well as the hopelessness of attempting to eradicate the drug trade altogether. After 10 years of Plan Colombia, the U.S. policy dating back to Bill Clinton’s administration of generously funding Colombia’s counternarcotics and counterinsurgency campaigns, violence in that country has diminished dramatically, the guerrillas are on the run, the paramilitary groups have been largely dismantled, and even corruption has dropped slightly. But as of 2007 Colombian cocaine exports have remained stable, along with the amount of land under coca leaf cultivation, and any future changes in supply would in any case be replaced by increases in the cocaine produced by Peru and Bolivia. The street price of cocaine in the United States today is higher than several years ago but well below its level a decade ago.

Indeed, the success of Mexico’s frontal assault on drug production and trafficking is about as unlikely as the prospect that American society will clam down on demand. A wiser course for Mexico would be to join Americans in lobbying to decriminalize marijuana and heroin, the two drugs easiest to deal with (the first because it is the least harmful and the second because it is the most harmful). Although marijuana legalization may not be imminent, recent polls show that more than 40 percent of Americans favor it and 54 percent of Democrats do.

To continue on the present course will require more and more intrusive U.S. cooperation, both for equipment and training of Mexican law enforcement personnel, as well as for intelligence and other tactical support. It is hard to imagine a scenario requiring U.S. boots on the ground, as has been the case in Colombia, but it is worth pointing out that a poll taken last March shows that 40 percent of Mexicans, a surprising proportion, would favor a U.S. military presence in Mexico in the fight against drugs.

What is clear is that Mexico cannot continue to have its joint and smoke it too: wanting greater and more modern forms of U.S. support but continuing to place traditional limits on it. The United States is funding the Mérida Initiative to boost the Mexican fight, but current levels of aid -- about $450 million per year -- are woefully insufficient, and doing the job properly would cost many billions of dollars a year. The Obama administration has followed in former President George W. Bush’s footsteps during his last two years in office and made this war the central and practically the only item on the bilateral agenda. The administration signed off on Calderón’s strategy as if its premises were rock-solid; this endorsement has been crucial for the ongoing crusade. But the premises proved misleading, the strategy is not working, and the mobilization of the army has led to mounting human rights abuses.
Mexico jumped into this fray without debate or reflection; it was easily misled by Calderón’s myths into believing this was a necessary war. But while few Mexicans were originally critical of the war, more and more have emerged to agree with the title of our book. The Failed War, as we called it, has sold more than 20,000 copies in three months and is part of a broader reassessment, in books, essays, and newspaper columns, of the Mexican tragedy.

I voted for Calderón and called on readers and sympathizers to do the same; I actively backed him during the post-election turmoil in 2006, particularly with foreign skeptics. So it was with some chagrin that in mid-2007 I began formulating many of these criticisms.

But the political culture in Mexico still rewards unthinking loyalty; if you question policy, no matter how substantive your case, people are quick to accuse you of having ulterior political motives. The debate on the whys and hows of Calderón’s war we have started seeing in print is still largely absent from television, the country’s dominant form of media. That’s a shame. Until we in Mexico publicly and collectively confront the tough questions the drug war entails, we will not have a sustainable policy or a viable strategy. And as long as the United States doesn’t question our answers, it will also lack a policy for the drug war and, more importantly, for Mexican development. This is a problem: If the war is to continue, it will be as much Obama’s as Calderón’s, and it will continue to distract from far more important matters, mainly, how to consummate Mexico’s remarkable, ongoing transition to a middle-class society.

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