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## CARTELS, CORRUPTION, AND CARNAGE IN THE CALDERÓN ERA

Few problems regarding the U.S.-Mexico border offer more challenge than those pertaining to illicit drugs.<sup>1</sup> Trafficking in marijuana, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, and other psychoactive substances involves tens of billions of dollars, intricate networks of criminals in both countries, and cooperative arrangements with government agents, from local law enforcement to high levels of both the U.S. and Mexican governments.

On the U.S. side, a key factor is an ineradicable demand for these drugs, combined with a longstanding legal policy of prohibiting their use. This combination drives the retail prices of the drugs to levels far beyond the cost of production, generating enormous profits for criminals and those who abet their activities on both sides of the border.

For decades, a symbiotic relationship between the political establishment and criminal organizations in Mexico served as a check on violence and threats to insecurity. In recent years, that balance has been upset, as criminal factions have raised the level of violence against each other in their struggle over control of the drug trade and against government forces attempting to stem that violence and establish a more legitimate democratic order.

The United States has ramped up its antidrug forces along the border and has sent hundreds of millions of dollars to Mexico to help bolster efforts to control and perhaps defeat the increasingly violent drug cartels.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the two countries are working, with mutual apprehensions, to increase collaboration among their several antidrug agencies. The outcome remains in doubt and no panaceas are in sight.

### THE GROWTH OF THE DRUG CARTELS

In 1914, the U.S. Congress passed the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, the country's first major effort to regulate the production, importation, and distribution of opiate drugs such as heroin, opium, and laudanum. Federal, state, and local laws against marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs soon followed, often accompanied by harsh penalties for their violation. Mexico, a major producer of marijuana and a significant source of opium, enacted similar laws, thus criminalizing what had long been legal behavior. The passage of such laws did little to affect the desire for the drugs in question, so Mexican farmers and entrepreneurs, now operating as outlaws, developed ways of smuggling their contraband products across the border to the United States. Although that task was fairly easy in the early years, the risks incurred in getting an illegal product from field to customer drove prices upward and produced substantial profits for those along the supply and delivery chain. The lure of lucre attracted a variety of criminal gangs to their enterprise. Eventually, consolidation occurred and a powerful Guadalajara-based crime figure, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, managed to gain control over most of the cross-border drug business.

In September 1969, President Richard Nixon formally declared a War on Drugs, aimed at marijuana, heroin (from Asia as well as Mexico), cocaine (from South America), and newly popular drugs such as LSD. The key components of that war, now waged for more than 40 years, have been eradication, interdiction, and incarceration. Despite the eradication of millions of marijuana, coca, and opium plants, the seizure of hundreds of tons of contraband, and the incarceration of

hundreds of thousands of offenders, accomplished at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, the successes of the War on Drugs have been few and impermanent. Demand varies over time (though remaining surprisingly stable over decades), but the supply is always sufficient to meet it. Difficulties in bringing a drug to market may raise the price, but that can also increase profits, assuring a ready supply of volunteers willing to take the risks.

Apparent success in one arena produces devastation in another. In the early 1980s, for example, U.S. operations aimed at thwarting the smuggling of cocaine from Colombia via Florida and the Caribbean by airplanes and “go-fast” boats proved sufficiently effective that the Colombians turned to Félix Gallardo and the extensive organization under his control. Mexico soon became the primary transshipment route for an estimated 90 percent of the cocaine that reached the United States, and the riches that accrued to that partnership grew to unimagined levels. Under Félix Gallardo’s oversight, the Colombian-Mexican coalition operated rather smoothly, in spite of stepped-up efforts by U.S. agents at major transit spots along the border and U.S. pressure on the Mexican government to increase its own antidrug efforts.

In 1989, prodded by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which furnished the Mexican government with intelligence about his activities and whereabouts, Mexican Federal Judicial Police arrested Félix Gallardo in his home. For a time, he was able to oversee his operation by mobile phone from prison, but as key men in his organization began to jockey for the top position, he brokered an arrangement by which the emerging rivals divided up the major trade routes and associated territories, known as the “plazas,” among themselves, thus giving birth to the four major cartels—Gulf, Sinaloa, Juárez, and Tijuana—that dominated the Mexican drug trade for more than two decades. In recent years, inter-gang rivalry, internal division, and the rise of new organizations have contributed to violence that has reached dramatic proportions.

The Gulf cartel, directed from Matamoros, across from Brownsville, Texas, and operating in the states along the Gulf of Mexico and under

South Texas, including the valuable entry port at Nuevo Laredo, was first headed by Juan Nepomuceno Guerra, who had risen to wealth and power by smuggling whiskey into Texas during Prohibition. He was succeeded by several men, the most notorious of whom was Osiel Cárdenas Guillen.

In the late 1990s, Cárdenas persuaded a group of elite Mexican army commandos (many of whom had received training that included counternarcotics tactics from American Special Forces instructors at Fort Bragg, North Carolina) to desert in search of a more rewarding life of crime. Known as Los Zetas and later enlarged by new recruits, they became notorious for their extreme brutality and brazen ways, but also for operations that reflect strategic planning, technological sophistication, and long-term aspirations.

The Sinaloa cartel, ensconced in the southwestern region that still produces most of the marijuana and opium grown in Mexico and, as of December 2012, the most powerful of the cartels, is headed by Joaquin “El Chapo” (“Shorty”) Guzmán, one of the world’s richest and most-wanted criminals. For decades, the gang included a subset led by four Beltrán Leyva brothers so powerful that it was often considered a separate organization and eventually broke away in bitter conflict.

The Juárez cartel, headquartered in El Paso’s sister city, was originally led by another powerful Sinaloan, Amado Carrillo Fuentes. After he died in 1997 during plastic surgery intended to alter his appearance to foil authorities, the leadership fell to his brother, Vincent Carrillo Fuentes. Most of the murderous violence that wracked Ciudad Juárez in recent years stemmed from the efforts of the Juárez group to repel the Sinaloa cartel’s attempts to gain control of valuable cross-border smuggling routes and, more recently, the drug traffic in Juárez itself.

Félix Gallardo ceded control of northwest Mexico to his seven nephews and four nieces of the Arellano-Félix family, based in Tijuana, with direct access to the rich California market. Once enormously powerful and violent, the Tijuana cartel was featured in the 2000 movie “Traffic.”

## THE ROLE OF CORRUPTION

It is crucial to recognize that these illegal operations, including a share of the violence, occurred with the knowledge, permission, blessing, and even encouragement of the Mexican political establishment, from local police and mayors to the highest levels of the ruling party, which for 70 years after its birth in 1929 was the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Like other institutions in Mexican society, the gangs operated in a patron-client or “elite-exploitative” relationship.<sup>3</sup> In return for being allowed to carry on their business without significant interference (or with overt assistance) from law enforcement personnel, the gang leaders were expected to pay what amounted to a franchise fee or tax on their earnings. The officials in question might simply accept a reasonable offer or, particularly at higher levels, make their expectations explicit. Precise arrangements and levels of officials involved have varied and accounts of these actions by historians, social scientists, and law enforcement agents differ on details, but there is little dispute regarding the overall pattern of thoroughgoing, institutionalized corruption. Luis Astorga, a sociologist at the Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a premier authority on Mexican drug trafficking, summarized the situation well: “The state was the referee, and it imposed the rules of the game on the traffickers. The world of the politicians and the world of the traffickers contained and protected each other simultaneously.”<sup>4</sup>

## CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE

Drug smugglers have proven to be resourceful, adaptable, practical, and persistent, choosing and inventing means to suit opportunity and thwart resistance. They have used standard and ultralight airplanes, high-speed boats, container ships, fishing vessels, small pleasure boats, motorized rafts, and submarines, and sent people across the border with drugs stuffed into backpacks and luggage, strapped to their limbs and torsos, secreted in bodily cavities, and swallowed in balloons to be eliminated on reaching their destination. Chapo Guzmán even opened a cannery that shipped jalapeños stuffed

with cocaine to Mexican-owned grocery stores in California.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, huge quantities have slipped into the United States via under-border tunnels, some crude, some stretching more than 150 yards and equipped with lights, ventilation, flooring, and other signs of skilled engineering.<sup>6</sup> But by far the most common method of transshipment is by motor vehicle—cars, vans, buses, trains, and, predominantly, trucks specially outfitted for the task with ingenious secret panels and other measures to disguise the nature of their cargo. U.S. and Mexican antidrug forces developed new methods of detection and increased the number of inspectors at the border, but the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) effectively guaranteed that such measures would have limited impact. According to U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, nearly 4.9 million trucks and 61 million personal vehicles crossed the U.S.–Mexico border in 2011.<sup>7</sup> Smugglers are caught from time to time, but the sheer volume of traffic makes it impossible for inspectors to check more than a small sample of vehicles. News media periodically issue dramatic reports of record seizures of drugs, but supply on the street seldom seems affected for long and antidrug agencies acknowledge that they have no reliable way of estimating the ratio of drugs seized to drugs available on the market. Few place the figure at higher than 10 percent; some think it as low as 1 to 4 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Because marijuana is bulkier and smellier than other drugs in the trade, it is easier to detect. This, coupled with the fact that it is by far the most widely used of all illegal drugs and produces a substantial percent of drug-related profits—estimates range from 70 percent to a much lower but probably more realistic 20 percent—has led the cartels to produce more of it in the United States, closer to its markets. DEA and local law enforcement agents have discovered cartel-operated “grows” in more than a dozen states and deep in national forests in California and the Pacific Northwest, where the overgrowth shields their plants from DEA surveillance planes. Whether grown locally or smuggled across the border, it is transferred to storage facilities in large cities, then distributed to regional wholesalers and retailers.

Despite marijuana’s popularity, most observers agree that cocaine accounts for a larger

share of drug traffickers' profits, followed by heroin and methamphetamines in uncertain order. But like other successful large enterprises, the cartels have branched into other fields of action such as kidnapping, extortion, prostitution, importing guns and other weapons, smuggling migrants, pirating CDs and DVDs, and investing in real estate and various businesses, some for the purpose of laundering proceeds from crime, some just to make money in a legitimate business.<sup>9</sup> One of the most profitable ventures in recent years has been siphoning gasoline and natural gas from the pipelines of the state-owned Pemex oil company and smuggling it into the United States, draining hundreds of millions of dollars from Mexico's coffers.<sup>10</sup>

"Narcos" also spend money to win the admiration of their local communities and the wider populace. Snakeskin boots, gaudy jewelry, high-powered trucks and SUVs, and beautiful women create an image that young men with few hopes for meaningful legal employment want to emulate. Generous funding of roads, schools, medical centers, communication systems, even churches and chapels, helps soften disapproval and fear of their violent ways, turning them into folk heroes in the eyes of many and generating a music genre called *narcocorridos* that glamorizes their exploits. Gift shops sell trinkets that reference the drug trade, and people throughout Mexico who are involved in that trade pay homage to Jesus Malverde, a folklore figure they regard as their patron saint, asking him to deliver them from evil in the form of their rivals in crime and their enemies in law enforcement. And when the young narcos die in battle, as thousands have, their friends and relatives bury many of them in elaborate tombs that celebrate their brief careers. Not yet 40 but perhaps not expecting to die of natural causes, Zeta leader Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano built a large mausoleum, fronted by a shiny three-story metal cross, to house his remains.<sup>11</sup>

## COOPERATION

Widespread discontent with the corruption and anti-democratic ethos of the PRI led to the rise and growing strength of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and a leftist Party

of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and also to pressures for reform within PRI itself. Ernesto Zedillo, president of Mexico from 1994 until 2000, attempted some reforms, and a few crime figures went to prison during his six years in office, but the cozy arrangement between the gangs and the government persisted.

The election of PAN member Vicente Fox in 2000 ended seven decades of PRI domination of the presidency. It also coincided with new levels of conflict among the cartels as they attempted to muscle in on valuable trafficking routes controlled by other gangs. Fox declared war on the cartels and sent federal police after them, resulting in the taking down of several high-profile drug trafficking figures, the most notable of which were Tijuana gang leaders Ramón and Benjamin Arellano-Félix in 2002 and the 2003 arrest of Gulf boss Osiel Cárdenas. It also led to a sharp increase in violence as the gangs fought back and tried to take advantage of perceived weaknesses among their rivals.

In 2004, with Cárdenas out of the way, Chapo Guzmán and the Sinaloans thought it was time to annex some valuable Gulf cartel territory, particularly the major Nuevo Laredo plaza, but were beaten back by the better equipped and trained Zetas, who were already strengthening their position within the Gulf cartel to the point that analysts were beginning to refer to the gang as the Gulf-Zetas. As Ioan Grillo observes in his 2011 book, *El Narco*, this was the real beginning of the modern Mexican drug war.<sup>12</sup>

On December 1, 2006, his first day in office after a hotly contested election, President Felipe Calderón, also a member of PAN, declared his determination to oppose the cartels with the full force of his government.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with its long-standing confidence in the efficacy of force, the United States endorsed and supported President Calderón's strategy. The United States has had antidrug agents in Mexico since the 1920s, not always with Mexico's approval and usually limiting their activities to intelligence gathering. Since the 1970s, however, the DEA has been an active partner in Mexico's antidrug programs. Its agents have shared intelligence with Mexican agencies and helped develop and carry out programs of eradication of marijuana and opium, seizure of contraband bound for



of Nuevo Laredo and Veracruz and weakened the Gulf hold on Tamaulipas. Emboldened further, the Zetas launched an aggressive effort to recruit new members and expand their reach, establishing a strong presence in other parts of Mexico. Grillo notes that the Zetas “were not thinking like gangsters, but like a paramilitary group controlling territory.”<sup>21</sup> Mike Vigil, retired head of international operations for the DEA and consultant for the Mexican government, agreed: “The Zetas have created a new model of organized crime and unleashed new levels of violence to try and unseat the older cartels. This has destabilized many areas of Mexico.”<sup>22</sup> They would eventually have a controlling or significant presence in more states even than the Sinaloans, although El Chapo continued to move more drugs.

By 2011, the Sinaloans dominated the Tijuana plaza. Chapo had also finally defeated Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and gained control of the Juárez plaza as well. Neither of those developments was a major surprise, given the Sinaloa organization’s size and resources, but it appears that Chapo had other help as well—from agents of both the U.S. and Mexican governments. Chapo’s rivals had long charged, and analysis of arrest statistics appeared to confirm, that Calderón, himself a Sinaloan, did not appear terribly interested in tracking down Guzmán. Calderón denied such allegations, pointing to the arrest or killing of several important members of the Sinaloa organization.

These suspicions gained weight in 2012 when several reputable publications provided evidence that Chapo had been giving information about his rivals to agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the DEA, with the tacit understanding that the Sinaloans would get what amounted to immunity from arrest and prosecution. A former drug dealer-turned-government informant told Newsweek’s Aram Roston that, with Chapo’s approval, he had gone to ICE agents in El Paso and offered to provide intelligence about the Juárez cartel. According to the article, at least five Sinaloans performed such service. “They provided tips about warehouses, drug routes, murders. They gave up information on who their enemies bribed and what their organizational charts were.” One of them, Juárez policeman Fierro Méndez, noted

that he told the agents nothing about Chapo’s operation. “It wasn’t allowed, and it wasn’t asked of me.” Another was told, “they were here to help [the Sinaloa cartel]. And to f... the Vicente Carrillo cartel. Sorry for the language. That’s exactly what they said.”

Humberto Loya Castro, a lawyer who worked for Chapo, performed similar services in Tijuana, giving information about the Arrellano Félix gang to DEA agents in San Diego. The information provided enabled U.S. and Mexican agents to make major drug busts and to take down Chapo’s enemies, reportedly including Arturo Beltrán Leyva in 2009. In return, according to the informants, Chapo was allowed to move tons of drugs into the United States without interference. University of Texas at El Paso professor Tony Payan said the Sinaloa cartel “is duping U.S. agencies into fighting its enemies ... It’s smart. It’s so smart.”<sup>23</sup>

This arrangement was so well known that Jesus Vicente Zambada Niebla, a high-ranking member of the Sinaloa gang who was arrested by Mexican military in 2009 and was being tried in federal court in Chicago in 2012, based his defense on a claim that he and other members of the cartel had been promised immunity from arrest and prosecution in return for the information Loya Castro was providing to U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies about rival cartels and their operations. U.S. prosecutors acknowledged that Loya Castro had served as a valuable “cooperating source” in return for personal immunity and that Chapo Guzmán was aware of the arrangement, but denied it extended beyond the lawyer. They also blocked Zambada Niebla’s attorneys’ access to documents and other evidence they say will support their client’s claim.<sup>24</sup>

Existence of a deal between U.S. officials and the Sinaloa cartel is further supported by e-mail correspondence, made public by WikiLeaks, between Stratfor, an Austin-based private intelligence organization, and a Mexican diplomat code-named MX1. The diplomat has been identified as Fernando de la Mora, stationed in the Mexican consulate in Phoenix. The e-mails, sent between 2008 and 2011, make it clear that the Mexican government recognized it badly needed U.S. help if it hoped to be successful against the cartels. In a fascinating message dated April 19, 2010, MX1 indicated that the Mexican government

had an unstated strategy that worked roughly as follows: If one or more organizations moves drugs through a given plaza in a discreet manner, without fighting among themselves or otherwise causing violence, the government would look the other way. If they caused trouble, the government would respond, attempting to take down whichever parties were most responsible for the violence. MX1 said he suspected the United States had a similar strategy and had recently sent a signal to the warring VCF (for Juárez capo Vicente Carrillo Fuentes) and Sinaloa forces that went something like the following:

“Thank you for providing our market with drugs over the years. We are now concerned about your perpetration of violence, and would like to see you stop that. In this regard, please know that Sinaloa is bigger and better than VCF. Also note that [Juárez] is very important to us, as is the whole border. In this light, please talk amongst yourselves and lets [sic] all get back to business. Again, we recognize that Sinaloa is bigger and better, so either VCF gets in line or we will mess you up.”

Addressing Stratfor once again, MX1 said, “I don’t know what the U.S. strategy is, but I can tell you that if the message was understood by Sinaloa and VCF as I described above, the Mexican government would not be opposed at all.”<sup>25</sup> After violence in Juárez dropped by 45 percent over the next year, Calderón credited job programs and other government investments. Analysts from Stratfor and other organizations contended that Sinaloa’s victory over the Juárez cartel likely played a greater role.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Calderón’s assertions that his plan was working, the body count continued to grow, with six times as many deaths recorded in 2010, 2011, and 2012 as in 2007, the first year of his offensive. In January 2012, the government acknowledged that at least 47,515 people had been killed in “drug-war-related” incidents between December 2006 and September 2011, but announced it would no longer update and release official figures.<sup>27</sup> Using data from the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the National System for Public Security, and her own tracing of deaths reported in Mexican media but not included in these figures, such as bodies found in

mass graves, New Mexico State University librarian and researcher Molly Molloy has estimated that the final total for Calderón’s administration will exceed 110,000, not including an unknown but large number of people who are “missing” or “disappeared” and likely to be killed. *Zeta*, a weekly magazine published in Tijuana, places the count at 109,000, noting that it does not include the missing.<sup>28</sup> Other observers regard these estimates as too conservative. Few appear to believe the frequently reported figures of 50,000 and 60,000.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout his six years in office, Calderón repeatedly asserted that over 90 percent of those killed in the violence were criminals, implying that the gangs may be weeding themselves out. U.S. officials, agents, and mainstream media have generally accepted this assertion, despite that fact that the Mexican government has produced little evidence to support such a figure. No doubt, much of the violence has been internecine, between cartels, factions therein, or opportunistic small gangs seeking to carve out a piece of the lucrative pie. The gangs have used violence as a way to taunt and terrorize, beheading their victims, hanging their obviously tortured bodies in public places, dissolving them in vats of lye or acid, and posting videos of their grisly deeds on YouTube.

They have assassinated a candidate almost certain to become governor of Tamaulipas, slain mayors, police chiefs, legislators, and journalists. They have repeatedly committed mass murder, burying their victims in shallow graves or simply leaving them stacked in the back of trucks. In some cases, authorities know who has been killed; in others, the dead may be rival gang members, kidnap victims, migrants who had paid the gangs to help them cross the border, innocents caught in a crossfire, or others deemed to be disposable.

More troubling but difficult to prove are repeated allegations, some based on eyewitness accounts, that uniformed military troops often acted as “death squads,” storming into areas, executing victims in precision fashion, and racing out as swiftly as they came. In other versions, such troops stood by a block away from prolonged attacks by unknown assailants, as if protecting them from interruption or making sure the job was finished according to plan.<sup>30</sup> According to e-mails obtained by WikiLeaks and shared

with Stratfor, at least some of these troops are Mexican Special Forces “making use of intelligence, surveillance and paramilitary-like tactics to take out their victims.” In this account, the victims may be drug trafficking cells or simply people the troops want out of the way, for whatever reason. A human rights worker in Juárez was quoted in London’s *Guardian* newspaper as saying, “There are execution squads [in Juárez], forensically killing *malandros* [‘down-and-outs, urchins, petty criminals and addicts’], planned assassinations of the unwanted. And if we look at exactly how they are done, they are experts in killing characteristic of training by the army or police ... I kept a map and watched how these [death] squads move across the army checkpoints without hindrance. Until I was told to stop.”<sup>31</sup>

Even apart from such allegations, the Army, which has been one of the most respected institutions in Mexican society, came under increased scrutiny and criticism. Business owners have claimed that the presence of armed soldiers on the streets, sometimes storming into bars and restaurants to search everyone in the building, discourages tourism, a major component of the Mexican economy. Others have reported abuses that include illegal searches, arresting and detaining people without cause, beatings, theft, rape, and torture.<sup>32</sup> Thousands of complaints against the army have been filed with Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission.<sup>33</sup> A woman protesting such abuses said, in 2008, “Now you see all these big billboards, ‘We [the Army] have come to help you’—but it isn’t true. They have come to pillage us, to ransack our homes. They take the food in the refrigerator, jewelry, anything ... and they destroy property. It is not a secret who they are.”<sup>34</sup> Observers also fear that sizable numbers of the troops will follow the example of the Zetas and desert to the cartels.<sup>35</sup> That fear is not groundless; in some cities, the Zetas have hung banners openly inviting the soldiers to join their ranks: “The Zetas operations group wants you, soldier or ex-soldier. We offer you a good salary, food, and attention for your family ... benefits, life insurance, a house for your family and children. Stop living in the slums and riding the bus. A new car or truck, your choice.”<sup>36</sup> *The Economist* magazine quotes Guillermo Zepeda of CIDAC, a think tank in Mexico City, expressing the fear that “We may

end up without trustworthy police and without a trustworthy army.”<sup>37</sup> Some Mexican reports charge that “the army has pulled off a coup d’etat, morphing into its own terrorist, drug-money collecting, gun-wielding cartel—morphing into an enemy in uniformed disguise to terrorize physically and spiritually the Mexican citizenry.”<sup>38</sup>

Paradoxically, arrival of military and federal troops in a city has typically resulted in initial lower levels of violence, followed by a notable and prolonged increase. Professor Denise Dresser of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) notes that when the military have entered troubled cities, they usually removed local police forces, regarding them as under control of the cartels. Without denying high levels of corruption among local police, Dresser contends that they know their cities and are better equipped to deal with violence. The military lack both this knowledge and experience with police work. The result is a climate of lawlessness in which not just drug traffickers but all sorts of criminals and people whose violence had been kept in check are able to operate with impunity. Nathan Jones, a cartel expert at Rice University’s Baker Institute, agrees, noting that an improved Tijuana police force, which was not disbanded when federal forces arrived, was able to manage “ordinary” violence more successfully than in some other large cities.<sup>39</sup>

Corruption remains a pervasive problem. Most observers agree that the law enforcement agencies operating at the border are widely compromised. Throughout the country, local police—underpaid, under-trained, and under-equipped—are clearly still on the take. Honest cops run the risk of contempt from their coworkers or of being killed because of fear they will expose the crooked ones. Hundreds of police have been killed since the Calderón initiative began. Some no doubt conscientiously opposed the drug gangs; others, reportedly a majority, simply worked for the wrong gang. Even those thoroughly vetted for trustworthiness may succumb to temptation, or give in when a gang confronts them with the choice, “*plata o plomo*”—silver or lead, bribe or bullet.

The corruption extends far up the line. In 2008, at least 35 agents from an elite organized crime unit within the attorney general’s office, including top officials ostensibly leading the crackdown against the cartels, were fired or arrested. According to

news accounts, they had for several years been receiving monthly payments ranging from \$150,000 to \$450,000 each, in return for keeping the cartels informed about government operations.<sup>40</sup> Payoffs of such size are apparently not unique; wiretaps used to bring indictments against members of the Gulf cartel caught discussions of bribes of \$2 million.<sup>41</sup> In May 2009, guards at a Zacatecas prison offered no resistance as 53 inmates walked out and drove away in a 17-car convoy.<sup>42</sup> Later that same month, federal agents accused 10 mayors from the state of Michoacan of abetting local drug traffickers.<sup>43</sup> In July 2010, prison officials in Durango were found to be sending prisoners, using official vehicles and armed with prison weapons, on designated assassination assignments.<sup>44</sup> At about the same time, 56 members of Tijuana law enforcement agencies were arrested for corruption, adding to more than 400 similar arrests or firings since January 2008. In May 2010, the mayor of Cancun was arrested on charges of aiding the Zetas and the Beltrán Leyva gang.<sup>45</sup> In July 2010, at least 140 inmates escaped from a prison in Nuevo Laredo, apparently with the aid of corrupt guards and the director.<sup>46</sup> In May 2011, Mexico's National Institute of Migration fired and detained seven regional directors suspected of turning Central American migrants over to kidnappers who could rob them, hold them for ransom, force them to work for the gangs, or, in the case of women, sell them into the sex trade.<sup>47</sup> Observers assume that many such victims wind up in the mass graves that continue to be discovered.

The sordid stories continued to come to light in 2012. In January, the attorney general of Mexico informed the past three governors of Tamaulipas that they were being investigated for possible collaboration with Mexican drug cartels. In May, the Mexican government arrested three high-ranking army generals and a retired lieutenant colonel on suspicion of aiding the Beltrán Leyva gang.<sup>48</sup> A month later, three federal policeman thought to be thought to be involved with drug traffic through Mexico City's international airport killed three of their fellow officers. In August, all 348 federal policemen assigned to the airport were replaced. In September, 131 inmates escaped from a prison in Piedras Negras, across from the South Texas town of Eagle Pass, through a tunnel that had obviously been under construction for some time. Authorities speculated it had been arranged by the Zetas,

probably with the knowledge of prison officials.<sup>49</sup> A June 15, 2012, *New York Times Magazine* article reported that a former police official from Ciudad Juárez, the city hardest hit by the violence between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels, claimed that the entire police department, including himself, had been on the Sinaloan payroll. Mexico's secretary of public security speculated that, in addition to officials further up the line, "the cartels spend more than a billion dollars each year just to bribe the municipal police." Civilians such as cabdrivers are also on the payroll, alerting traffickers to such things as stepped-up inspections or increased police presence at the border.<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly, competing gangs complain, sometimes in full-page newspapers ads, that the police are colluding with their rivals.<sup>51</sup>

Those who criticize the gangs publicly or attempt to expose the corruption that enables them do so at their own peril. In April 2009, a Roman Catholic archbishop in Durango wondered publicly why the authorities seemed unable to locate "El Chapo," since he was widely known to be living nearby. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, most local media did not report the explosive comments, and copies of national papers that ran the story appeared on few newsstands. A day or two later, the archbishop backpedaled, claiming that he was simply repeating things of the sort people say to their pastor.<sup>52</sup> As a further safety measure, he began traveling with bodyguards and ordered an armored car.<sup>53</sup> The timidity of the media in this case is understandable. Gangs have attacked newspaper offices and TV stations after they have published or aired stories attacking the cartels or exposing their ties to public officials. In 2012, the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas reported that at least 80 journalists had been killed and 17 gone missing in Mexico since 2000.<sup>54</sup> The International Press Institute Death Watch called Mexico "the deadliest country in the world for journalists in 2011."<sup>55</sup> Arrests and prosecutions of those responsible for the journalist killings are essentially nonexistent. Many journalists exercise self-censorship, ignoring stories on drug trafficking and confining their reporting to "weddings, *quinceañeras*, and baptisms."<sup>56</sup> In a stunning admission of helplessness, *El Diario*, the largest daily newspaper in Ciudad Juárez, ran a front-page editorial in September 2010 after two staffers had been murdered by drug gangs, asking

cartel “Lords” to “explain to us what you want from us. What are we supposed to publish or not publish, so we know what to abide by. You are at this time the de facto authorities in this city because the legal authorities have not been able to stop our colleagues from falling.”<sup>57</sup> In July 2012, after its offices were attacked with grenades and rifle fire, *El Mañana*, the major regional newspaper based in Nuevo Laredo, announced it would stop reporting on “violent disputes,” citing the “lack of adequate conditions for freely exercising professional journalism.”<sup>58</sup>

Corruption is not the special province of Mexicans. As the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency has stepped up hiring, it has had problems not only with agents who go bad while on the job but with some who are already in the employ of the cartels when they come to work.<sup>59</sup> And it would be naive to imagine that the dispersal of drugs across the United States does not receive assistance from law enforcement agents, lawyers, judges, bankers, and business owners willing to profit from their positions. Since June 2006, the website [stopthedrugwar.org](http://stopthedrugwar.org) has published a regular feature, “This Week’s Corrupt Cop Stories,” describing illegal behavior by U.S. drug-law enforcement agents from small towns to major cities, from local police to federal agents, and from prison guards to district attorneys and judges. Each issue describes several instances of malfeasance. The September 12, 2012, issue was number 750 in the series.<sup>60</sup>

Reading through these items is depressing, but their significance pales in comparison to the activities of banks that abet cartel efforts to launder the stains from their drug money and turn it into easily usable funds in Mexico or wherever the drug bosses want or need it. In addition to banks in Mexico and offshore tax havens, banks north of the border often look the other way when large sums of money start churning through accounts belonging to customers they have not thoroughly vetted. Some of the world’s largest banks have been party to such schemes. In 2010, Wachovia, now owned by Wells Fargo, acknowledged that it had turned funds from Mexican *casas de cambio* (money-exchange houses) into \$378 billion deposited in Wachovia accounts, despite the fact that the transactions violated a number of anti-money-laundering warning signs. To avoid prosecution, Wachovia settled out of court for \$160 million in penalties, less than .001 percent of the amount laundered. No one responsible for

allowing these transactions was prosecuted. The whistle-blower whose task was to spot and report such abuses lost his job.<sup>61</sup>

Another large international bank, London-based HSBC with operations in more than 80 countries, has been accused of failing to monitor billions of dollars in wire transfers from its Mexican affiliates and trillions from other countries, including Russia, Iran, and Bangladesh. A congressional Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs investigating the HSBC case chastised not only the bank for its flouting anti-money-laundering regulations, but also the U.S. watchdog Office of the Comptroller of the Currency for laxity in oversight.<sup>62</sup> More recently, the FBI has alleged that the Zetas have laundered modest amounts—a million dollars a month—through the Bank of America, but blames laxity rather than deliberate oversight by the bank.<sup>63</sup>

Whether laundered or still blood-stained, much of the drug money gets back to Mexico in the same ways the drugs get out—smuggled by some of the same people using some of the same means, even some of the same vehicles making return trips. U.S. and Mexican authorities agree that they are able to intercept no more than one percent of the billions that flow across the border each year.<sup>64</sup> Less straightforward ways of sterilizing blood money include using dollars to buy goods such as silk or toys or electronics products from a third country such as China, then having those items shipped to Mexico where they can be sold through legal businesses. The Zetas laundered millions through a horse breeding operation in Ruidoso, New Mexico.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting on the difficulty of damming the river of dirty money on its way back to the gangs, Calderón said in an October 2011 meeting with drug-war victims that “Without question, we have been at fault. The truth is that the existing structures for detecting money-laundering were simply overwhelmed by reality.”<sup>66</sup>

These problems, coupled with concern over the tremendous financial cost of Calderón’s war on drugs at a time when the Mexican economy is already weak, led to doubts that the campaign will succeed. A March 2010 poll published in the daily *Milenio* newspaper reported that only 21 percent (down from 28 percent a year earlier) of the Mexican public thought the government was winning its fight with the cartels.<sup>67</sup> Surveys by the Pew Global

Attitudes Project were considerably more positive, with 45 percent in 2011 and 47 percent in 2012 saying they thought the campaign against drug traffickers was making progress. More than 80 percent in both surveys approved of using the Mexican army in the effort, but 74 percent in the 2012 poll called human rights violations by the military and police a serious problem.<sup>68</sup>

However they received their information—from the Sinaloans, DEA agents working with Mexican counterparts, or Mexican intelligence personnel working on their own—Mexican military and federal police were able to score some notable victories. Some cartels have lost key players, with an undoubted negative effect, temporarily for some, more significantly for others. The killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva in December 2009 and the subsequent arrest of his two brothers and another key leader, Edgar “La Barbie” Valdez Villareal, left the Beltrán Leyva organization severely weakened. The whereabouts of a remaining brother was unknown in late 2012 and Mexican authorities regarded the organization as defunct, though remnants were still working with the Zetas.

A smaller but formidable gang, La Familia Michoacana, specialized in meth trafficking and gained notoriety for horrendous attention-grabbing violence—for example, rolling heads of victims onto a dance floor in 2006—and its incongruous profession of a form of fundamentalist Christianity espoused by its most prominent leader, Nazario Moreno González, aka “El Más Loco” (“The Craziest One”). After federal troops killed Moreno in a firefight in December 2010 and federal police captured another key leader in June 2011, La Familia faded, but leading members of the gang formed another organization known as Knights Templar, which professed an interest in social justice and retained traces of respect for religion—when Pope Benedict XVI visited Mexico in March 2012, they hung banners on bridges in seven cities proclaiming “The Knights Templar Cartel will not partake in any warlike acts, we are not killers, welcome Pope.”<sup>69</sup>

In January 2010, federal police arrested Teodoro “El Teo” Garcia Simental, who had risen to the top in Tijuana after the fall of the Arellano-Félix clan and was regarded as the most vicious trafficker in the country. That reputation was underscored 10 days later with the arrest of Santiago Meza López, known as “El Pozolero” (“The Stew Maker”) for his practice

of disposing of El Teo’s victims by dissolving their bodies in vats of acid.<sup>70</sup> In November 2010, Mexican marines, believed to be acting on information provided by the DEA, killed Osiel Cárdenas’s brother Antonio, a top commander in the Gulf cartel known as “Tony Tormenta,” in an hours-long gun battle in Matamoros.<sup>71</sup> The cartel, weakened by the split with the Zetas and continuing to lose territory and power, suffered what appeared to be crippling loss in September 2012 when marines arrested Mario Cárdenas, who had taken Tony’s place, and Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sánchez, believed to be the actual top man in the cartel. Seven more alleged key members of the Gulf gang were arrested a week later.<sup>72</sup> Of 37 gangsters on Mexico’s most-wanted list, 25 had been killed or captured by the end of Calderón’s presidency on December 1, 2012.<sup>73</sup>

Such losses take their toll, whether in the form of internal strife as remaining members seek to take over or through the efforts of rival gangs to take advantage of presumed disruption. But Nathan Jones cautions against prematurely announcing a cartel’s demise. The Gulf cartel has been in business for decades, has deep roots in northeastern Mexico, knows the trafficking game, and has extensive wholesale networks in the United States. These make it unlikely that it will simply fade away. Similarly, he notes that although the once powerful Tijuana cartel has clearly been weakened by the death or imprisonment of all the key Arellano-Félix brothers and other important figures, and may have lost its dominance over Baja California, it appears to have worked out a satisfactory arrangement with the Sinaloa cartel to share the Tijuana “plaza,” including the right to a “piso” (toll) on drugs sent through its territory.<sup>74</sup>

Internal rivalries within the larger organizations and with and between the smaller ones, as well as aggressive efforts by military and law enforcement agencies, make it difficult to sketch the situation with any confidence about long-range accuracy. But in 2012, the Mexican drug cartels had evolved into recognizable coalitions, with a Sinaloan aggregate controlling most of the western part of the country, including Baja California, and the Zetas holding sway in the northeast and Gulf regions, although torn internally by a split between two original leaders, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano and Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales. Mexican Marines killed Lazcano in a shootout on October 7, 2012, but a band of Zetas

calling themselves Los Legionarios announced their intent to fight Treviño, who they said had betrayed many of his associates.<sup>75</sup> Smaller organizations formed alliances of conveniences with each other and the major cartels. Peaceful acceptance of the situation, as in the old days of Félix Gallardo, did not appear to be on the horizon. In March, Chapo gave notice that he was ready to make another run at Nuevo Laredo when his gunmen killed 14 Zetas, dumped their bodies, and plastered the area with *narcomantas* (banners) announcing his intention to free the city from Zeta control. Deriding the Zetas as “a bunch of drunks and car-washers,” the banners declared, “We are narcotics traffickers and we don’t mess with honest working or business people ... I’m going to teach these scum to work Sinaloa style, without kidnapping, without payoffs, without extortion.” They also warned that anyone giving in to extortion demands from the Zetas would be considered a traitor. “Don’t forget,” the banner warned, “I am your true father.” Addressing Miguel Treviño, the notoriously violent Zeta leader in control of the city, by his code name Z-40, Chapo added a taunt, “As for you, 40, I tell you that you don’t scare me.” Former DEA chief Mike Vigil said Chapo hoped to gain popular support by portraying himself as “the protector of the poor people against the Zetas. Obviously it is a vested interest because it behooves him and the other cartels to get rid of the Zetas that are causing a lot of problems for them.”<sup>76</sup>

Poor people may not have been Chapo’s only intended audience. He was doubtless aware that in 2011 the White House had issued an executive order naming four groups around the world as “transnational criminal threats.” The list included a Japanese syndicate, a Mafia-style Italian outfit, a multiethnic international organization led from Russia—and Los Zetas. It did not include the Sinaloa cartel. A White House spokesman explained that the groups on the list were engaged in a “wide variety” of crimes, whereas the Sinaloans engaged mostly in drug trafficking and were already a major target under a separate initiative.<sup>77</sup> That did not amount to a free pass, but it seemed to offer Chapo an advantage, and he intended to keep it. According to a *New York Times* report, a captured cartel member said that Chapo “specifically instructed his subordinates not to dabble in protection rackets and insisted that Sinaloa territory remain ‘calm’ and ‘controlled.’” He considered extortion, kidnapping,

and the like too risky. “They want the big business,” the captive explained, “and the big business is in the United States.”<sup>78</sup>

The ability of Mexico’s top drug trafficker to remain alive and free and continue to run and expand his far-flung operation was such an obvious embarrassment to Calderón that some speculated his government might be planning a “June Surprise” in advance of the July 2012 presidential elections, giving Calderón a coveted victory and boosting the chances of the PAN candidate against the popular (and ultimate winner) Enrique Peña Nieto, who sought to lead PRI back to power. In an article titled “Mexico’s Presidential Contest: Calderón’s ‘Hail Mary’ Pass?” George Grayson, a cartel expert at the College of William and Mary, ventured that “bringing down El Chapo would alter Calderón’s place in his nation’s books from a chief executive who waged a bloody, unfocused drug war to a leader who eliminated a criminal compared favorably with Osama bin Laden, Butch Cassidy, and Al Capone.”<sup>79</sup>

Similar thoughts were apparently afoot in Washington, where the Pentagon is reported to have prepared a detailed plan for a surgical strike on Chapo, similar in nature to the mission that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011, and to be carried out by Navy Seals of the Northern Command as part of their mission to capture and kill targets they consider to be terrorists and a threat to national security. According to the report, Calderón liked the idea, but could not sell it to the leaders of his armed forces, primarily because they regarded it as an unconstitutional affront to Mexican sovereignty. Pentagon officials involved indicated they would raise the matter again with Calderón’s successor.<sup>80</sup>

Chapo Guzmán is a brutal criminal. He is also a brilliant executive overseeing a sprawling transnational enterprise dealing in global commodities. He is amazingly well protected, but he is not superhuman. If rivals from other gangs or from within his own circles do not kill him, it is quite believable that Mexican or U.S. forces will succeed in bringing him down. That would be a triumph for whoever accomplished it and would likely be heralded as yet another sign that the war on drugs was being won. But in the short term, it would almost certainly raise the level of violence as various interested parties moved either to ascend to the top spot or to wrest territory away from an organization weakened by loss of its leader. As Luis

Astorga has aptly observed, “The capture of capos doesn’t necessarily mean defeat for the cartels. It just means new criminal coalitions, new alignments, and that process can lead to more expansive waves of violence, not less.”<sup>81</sup>

In his successful campaign for the presidency, Peña Nieto insisted that “there will be no truce or deals with either organized crime or drug trafficking,” but contended that use of the military had exacerbated the violence in Mexico. “We can’t continue that way,” he told *Time* reporters. “So we’re going to follow a strategy focused on three central crimes: murder, kidnapping, and extortion. But make no mistake: it’s our duty to finish off organized crime gangs, including drug traffickers.”<sup>82</sup> Bruce Bagley of the University of Miami told a *Forbes* reporter, “He said he’s going to place less emphasis on the military and more on social and social-economic things—but what exactly that means is unclear. Me and my colleagues in Mexico are saying that means basically that he’s going to lighten up—in the hopes that there would be far less bloodshed and fewer bodies.” Veteran Mexican journalist Dolia Estévez agreed. “The Mexican people are asking for a change on that kind of war,” she said. “It’s clear. Mexico has been insistent ... that the problem is the demand in the U.S., and the flow of guns to Mexico. They [ask], ‘Why are we going to be fighting this war that has no possibility of being won?’”<sup>83</sup>

Clearly, a key factor in this discouraging process is the truly enormous amount of money that can be made by dealing drugs, especially by those in charge of the dealing. The money enables the cartels to recruit whatever personnel they need, whether it be drivers and pilots, accountants and lawyers, computer and communications experts, or assassins and bodyguards, and to equip them with whatever they need to ply their trade. It also funds the corruption of law enforcement, political, and financial systems on both sides of the border, more extensive in Mexico but also significant in the United States. And some observers assert that this influx of money, much of which is pumped into the legal economy, has caused many Mexicans, especially those living far away from the border states where most of the violence has occurred, to view the cartels as less threatening to their lives than the government’s efforts to eradicate them.

It has long been obvious that the great bulk of that money comes from buyers in the United States,

but only recently have Mexicans and other Latin Americans begun to insist that the United States acknowledge this fact and take sweeping steps to deal with its implications. In the process, they have begun to urge the United States to reconsider its adamant insistence on prohibition of the drugs in question. Calderón challenged the United States to take stock of its own failings, especially with regard to drug consumption and laws that facilitate the trafficking in guns and other weapons that have strengthened the cartels in their struggle with the federal police and the army.<sup>84</sup> Even more significantly, the former presidents of Mexico (Ernesto Zedillo), Colombia (César Gaviria), and Brazil (Fernando Enrique Cardoso) co-chaired a blue-ribbon Latin American commission whose 2009 report, *Drugs and Democracy: Toward a Paradigm Shift*, explicitly called on the United States to acknowledge that its decades-long War on Drugs had failed and to give serious consideration to “diverse alternatives to the prohibitionist strategy that are being tested in different countries, focusing on the reduction of individual and social harm.”<sup>85</sup> This call was repeated in a 2011 report by what is now billed as the Global Commission on Drug Policy, adding such luminaries as former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, former U.S. Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker, former prime minister of Greece George Papandreou, former president of Switzerland Ruth Dreifuss, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, and British entrepreneur Richard Branson.<sup>86</sup>

This message has been received. In her first visit to Mexico as secretary of state, in 2009, Hillary Clinton acknowledged that the “insatiable demand for illegal drugs [in the United States] fuels the drug trade.”<sup>87</sup> The director of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske, has announced that his office will place greater emphasis on prevention and treatment. In addition, authorities at the local, state, and national levels are calling for a comprehensive and open-minded examination of alternatives to drug policies notable for repeated failure. In the November 2012 elections, both Colorado and Washington State voted to legalize the sale and use of small quantities of marijuana, consciously challenging still-operative federal prohibition. Still, no sweeping change in U.S. policy is in sight, and Mexico cannot plan around one.

Because at least the major cartels have developed into full-scale criminal organizations, the Mexican government has little choice but to attempt to check their power and the damage they cause. Aggressive action by the Mexican government, advisable or not, has exacerbated the violence far beyond Calderón's imagining. Although actions against criminals should be waged by the police rather than the army insofar as possible, Calderón's use of the army and navy was understandable, given their numbers, advanced weaponry, and reputation as less corrupted institutions, but the costs of that decision have been steep. The Mexican government should work to shift from a mindset of war to one of crime fighting and to reduce the role of the military, while strengthening that of the police. It must continue to build and reinforce professional civil service, law enforcement, and judicial systems, from local to federal levels, with effective measures to prevent, identify, check, prosecute, and punish corruption and violation of the rights of citizens. This will involve improvement in pay, higher educational requirements, vigilant screening, and continuing reinforcement of appropriate values and attitudes. Obviously, this is a mammoth and daunting task. The United States can offer assistance, but most of this work will have to be done by Mexicans.

During his campaign, Peña Nieto announced that he intended to form a "national gendarmerie," a deployable police force comprising ex-soldiers who had already proved to be able and reliable while fighting in Calderón's war. Such a force could serve as backup to local police, with power to make arrests, but could also act as a commando-style elite strike force against cartel cells. Response to the idea has been unenthusiastic. Tony Payan noted that many mayors and governors had created such forces, "only to see them become corrupt, ineffectual, and eventually dismantled. The record shows that many of the specially trained officers end up dead, spend much of their time protecting each other from cartels, or desert and join the criminals."<sup>88</sup>

No one seriously suggests that the Mexican government should acknowledge that Calderón's war on the cartels was a mistake, then simply pull back in admission of defeat, but Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's foreign minister under President Vicente Fox, has called for an informal accommodation in which the government relaxes its opposition to the cartels in return for a significant reduction

in violence.<sup>89</sup> Castañeda's critics argue that giving cartels tacit permission to operate would undermine public confidence in the rule of law.<sup>90</sup> In a variation of the idea, however, Eric Olson, a senior associate at the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, has suggested that a viable approach might be for the Mexican government to designate one group as "most violent," using transparent and openly announced criteria, then go after them aggressively with the support of the United States. This, he contends, should create incentives among criminal organizations to avoid the "most violent" label for themselves and to cut ties with the group so labeled, lest they be targeted as well. Ideally, this would produce "commercial leprosy" that would further weaken the organization.<sup>91</sup>

Even the most optimistic of observers appear to believe that eventual success lies years in the future and will come only with great effort and cost. Toward that end, both countries must work to improve educational and employment opportunities, so that young people in particular do not turn to drugs and crime because they have abandoned hope of achieving a meaningful life by legal means. And finally, both countries, in dialogue with other nations in the hemisphere, in Europe, and elsewhere, should examine the drug policies and programs of other countries to consider viable alternatives to a policy of strict prohibition. A growing number of countries have adopted such policies, either officially or de facto. Usage rates have generally remained stable, without an increase in problems popularly associated with the drugs in question. Equally notable, the quite high usage rates in the United States persist despite some of the harshest penalties in the world. Looking with an open mind at alternative systems should help dispel the fear that any change to current policies will lead to catastrophe.

The hope that the governments of the United States and Mexico will act on these recommendations is profound. The expectation that they will do so is modest. An observer with deep ties and personal experience in both the United States and Mexico compared the conflict among the cartels and between the cartels and the government to a sporting event. Spectators in both the government and the public may keep score as individual contests are won or lost and as teams move up or down in the

standings, but regardless of the treasure expended and the damage done, drugs will still be desired, provided, and sold. And as long as societies and their governments treat drug use as a crime rather than as a matter of public health, the deadly game will continue, season after season.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “cartel” in the familiar sense, meaning large, recognizably distinct drug-trafficking organizations, which may themselves comprise a network of organizations that cooperate in criminal activity. Though the term may have been somewhat apt in Félix Gallardo’s day, it no longer describes the situation. The Mexican drug-trafficking organizations do not collude to set prices, rig bids, allocate market share, regulate total industry output, or otherwise reduce competition. When they co-exist in relative peace, it may well be because one has triumphed over the other or both have grown exhausted from the battle for supremacy. That said, “cartel” has gained such currency in the popular parlance as to render the fight for linguistic precision rather pointless. It also works well in titles.

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