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Bright Beginnings, Failed Finales: The Sexenio Pattern of US Perceptions of Mexican Counter Narcotics Efforts

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"Mexico's new President, Carlos Salinas de Gotari, has promised ... that his Government will intensify its war against drugs into new efforts that will 'make life miserable for drug traffickers'"

"Mexican Leader Vows Action Against Drugs"
The New York Times
December 12, 1988

"Minutes after Mexicans learned they had elected Vicente Fox Quesada as their president, they watched him glare into the cameras in his first nationally broadcast interview and issue a sober warning to drug traffickers. 'To the criminals ... they should know the one thing we don't want in Mexico is criminality, violence, drug trafficking, organized crime. To them, I say, this is the last call.'"

"Familiar Foe for Mexico's New Leader: Corruption"
The New York Times
July 6, 2000

"Since he took office on December 1, Mr. Calderon has moved against the drug cartels with a speed that has amazed officials in Mexico and the United States alike. ... 'This is a permanent fight, in which, unfortunately, many have lost their lives. We are fighting without rest so that these sacrifices will not be in vain.'"

"Mexico's Latest War on Drug Gangs Is Off to a Rapid Start"
The New York Times
January 27, 2007

Introduction

Every six years Mexico inaugurates a new president. Since re-election is unconstitutional, each presidential election involves a transition, a changing of personnel and policy. Typically, a new sexenio (presidential term) begins with great promise, characterized by inspiring political rhetoric and vows of reform. As the above quotes suggest, this pattern characterizes Mexico's drug policy. For more than two decades, the Mexican government has pursued a war on drugs, targeting production and trafficking. Successive presidential administrations have entered office, promising victory. Yet, despite all these efforts, narcotics and drug trafficking remain a challenge. Some might even argue that narcotics and drug trafficking are even more problematic today than in the past.

US perceptions of Mexican counter narcotics policy reveal a consistent pattern. Since each administration enters office pledging policy modifications that will result in success, the US government greets each new sexenio with anticipation and expectations of victory. By the end of the sexenio, drug trafficking and production continue, basically unabated, and the United States laments that the presidential administration is unable (or unwilling) to combat it. The incoming administration is viewed as a savior, the key to winning the war on drugs. Thus, the cycle begins anew.

Currently, the United States and Mexico are at the start of a new sexenio cycle. President Calderon of Mexico has renewed the government's efforts against drug trafficking. The Bush Administration has requested new funds to assist the government of Mexico in its drug war. Optimism abounds: "The determination and commitment shown by the Calderon Administration is historic; and the early results impressive." (US Department of State, 2007b) This was the assessment offered by the United States government as it unveiled the "Merida Initiative" seeking more funding to assist Mexican counter-narcotics efforts: "To combat the threats of drug trafficking, transnational crime, and terrorism in this Hemisphere, the President today is requesting \$500 million as part of a \$1.4 billion program to fund security cooperation with Mexico." However, a review of past Mexican counter narcotics efforts indicates that the program ("Plan Mexico," as some dub it) is likely to have no discernible impact.

Why?

Both the Mexican government and the US government engage in a drug war emphasizing eradication, interdiction, extradition, and law enforcement. While specific aspects of this policy might change, the punitive and supply-side focus remains unchanged. Research suggests that the supply-side focus has limited chance for success; indeed, it frequently has the opposite effect. A growing number of experts suggest that a change in strategy and perspective is essential (see, for instance, Robinson and Scherlen, 2007; Mares, 2006, Youngers and Rosin, 2004). With demand remaining essentially unchanged, interruptions in supply result in increasing rewards for drug trafficking. Likewise, targeting drug supplies typically results in the weeding out of less successful cartels and

organizations, creating a type of evolutionary process that accelerates the development of sophisticated and agile criminal organizations. While officials at the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) acknowledge that “[f]or close to 30 years, trafficking organizations from Mexico have been adaptable, persistent, and savvy in the ways they met the changing drug market dynamics, first providing heroin, then marijuana, then cocaine, and now methamphetamine”(Constantine, 1996), the implications of this assessment are ignored. As long as the demand for drugs remains, supply-side efforts are doomed.

Thus, the evidence suggests that -- contrary to the beliefs of the US government -- it is not policy implantation but rather the policy itself, which is flawed. From this vantage point, it appears that no Mexican president can succeed in this war on drugs. This makes continuation of a failed policy hard to fathom. Why would Mexican presidents waste blood and treasure on a losing strategy? The Mexican government, however, is not operating based upon a cost-benefit analysis within its own borders with regard to the drug war. Drug policy in Mexico is premised upon the larger framework of US-Mexican relations. From this perspective, the continuation of the failing policy is more understandable. In essence, the United States does not permit Mexico to change its policies. Despite research to the contrary, government documents, press reports, and statements demonstrate that the US government continues to believe that the failure of the drug war in Mexico reflects failed policy implementation, not a failed policy. Thus, Mexico is trapped in a vicious cycle: unceasing US pressure to make ever increasing efforts to achieve policy goals that cannot be achieved by the means utilized.

A Lack of Effort or a Lackluster Policy? Evaluating Mexico

Reading US coverage of the drug war in Mexico can be a bit disconcerting. One is rather forcibly reminded of the adage that history repeats itself. Drugs and drug trafficking have been part of the bilateral agenda for almost a century. And, the US approach has been predominantly supply-side focused. For instance, even in the 1920s, administrators within the Treasury Department and the State Department “hypothesized that if producer countries totally prohibited drug production, then prices would become exorbitant hence leaving US consumers unable to purchase drugs.” (Recio, 2002) However, despite almost 100 years of policy failure, this supply-side approach has not been questioned.

Most assessment of US-Mexican drug policy dates from the 1970s. The 1960s witnessed a dramatic increase in US drug consumption. The return from Southeast Asia of addicted soldiers, as well as growing youth usage, prompted President Nixon to declare drugs America’s number one enemy in June of 1971. Even before this, the United States had placed pressure upon Mexico with regard to drug trafficking. Operation Intercept, launched in September, 1969, essentially closed the US-Mexican border by searching every person and vehicle crossing from Mexico into the United States. For US officials, the “objective [wa]s to reduce and eliminate the contraband traffic into the United States and, ultimately, to control it at the source by eradicating the production of marijuana and opium poppies in Mexico.” (Craig, 1980) Operation Condor was the Mexican government’s drug policy campaign in the mid-to late 1970s. The Mexican government

(with assistance from the US) sought to (1) eradicate marijuana and opium poppies; (2) interdict the flow of narcotics into the US; and, (3) dislocate drug trafficking organizations. (Toro, 1995: 18) This three pronged approach of eradication, interdiction, and arrest hasn't been fundamentally altered in the intervening decades. Evaluations of Mexican counter narcotics efforts have focused on tactics, resources, and "political will". The overall approach has not been questioned.

US reviews of the Mexican government's drug war efforts take place frequently. The US Department of State issues an annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. The US Congress has engaged in annual drug certification of Mexico. And, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) provides overviews of its international efforts and the work of cooperating states. Furthermore, the General Accounting Office offers periodic assessment of US drug policy, including the cooperative efforts of allied countries. These official pronouncements are supplemented by statements and testimony of DEA officials, ONDCP officials, and press reports.

A survey of US evaluations reveals a consistent pattern. Each new sexenio is greeted with hope and praise. Subsequently, the US government identifies areas for improvement and requests for changes in Mexican policy. The latter years of a presidential sexenio are characterized by criticism, acknowledgments of failure, and suggestions for change. For instance, in the early 1980s, the administration of President de la Madrid declared that drug trafficking was a national security issue, eliciting praise from the United States. (Youngers and Rosin, 2004: 277) Yet, by the end of the de la Madrid sexenio, US officials were openly stating that they did "not believe that Mexico [wa]s cooperating completely with drug-enforcement efforts, but they [we]re reluctant to cut off aid" (Roberts, 1988). The sexenio began with a anti-corruption drive, De la Madrid's "*renovación moral de la sociedad*" -- moral renovation of society -- and ended being perceived as "el sexenio de la impunidad" - the sexenio of impunity. (Morris, 1991: 99) This is repeated again and again. The United States government argued that

[a] major change in Mexico's approach to the problems associated with narcotics trafficking occurred in late 1988 with the inauguration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The Department of State reports that President Salinas has elevated the threat posed by narcotics to a national security issue and has taken aggressive action to combat the narcotics problem. (GAO, 1993: 11-12)

Yet, by the end of the sexenio, Salinas's administration was under a cloud of suspicion. Rather quickly after leaving office, the Salinas family became involved in law suits and court cases. The New York Times reported about a Mexican drug war official who testified in the United States that

a major Mexican drug trafficker had told him of making large cash payments to Raul Salinas de Gortari during the presidency of Mr. Salinas's brother, Carlos.

Mr. Gonzalez said he relayed these allegations to President Salinas in 1992 and to American officials a year later. (Dillon, 1996)

As you might now expect, the election of a new president in 1994 was accompanied by a change in evaluation:

US-Mexico counter-narcotics cooperation has increased Substantially since the inauguration of President Zedillo in December 1994, with the full range of law enforcement, military, and border and drug control agencies being involved. While the flow of drugs from Mexico remains high ... the Clinton Administration seems confident that President Zedillo is committed to rooting out corruption and establishing a close working relationship with the United States in this area. (Storrs, 1998: 5)

By the end of the Zedillo administration, US government assessment had soured. The arrest of the head of Mexico's anti-narcotics program in 1997 was just the most dramatic event in the declining relations. Several times the US Congress threatened to "decertify" Mexico due to increasing drug flows, reports of corruption, and lack of cooperation.

Even the unprecedented election of an opposition politician to the presidency did not change this sexenio pattern. In July 2000, for the first time since the founding of the party in 1929, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) did not win the presidency. Vicente Fox Quesada, of the *Partido de Accion Nacional* (PAN) won this historical election. The annual State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports in the first years of Fox's administration (Reports for 2002 and 2003) stated that "the United States and Mexico achieved unprecedented levels of cooperation in fighting drug trafficking". Yet, by 2005 the Mexican government itself was acknowledging that a "major drug cartel had a spy inside the office of President Vicente Fox who fed one of its traffickers precise information about the president's movements for more than three years" (McKinley, 2005) By the end of the sexenio,

the United States ... openly berated Mexico for failing to stop a wave of drug-related violence that has taken close to 1,000 lives along the 2,000-mile border. The Bush administration ... issued numerous travel advisories and temporarily closed its consulate in the city of Nuevo Laredo, which has turned into a murder capital as drug traffickers fight for control of lucrative routes into Texas. (Thompson, 2005)

Unsurprisingly, the election of a new administration in Mexico brought was cheered by the US government:

experts on the drug trade are optimistic that [Calderon] will do better than Mr. Fox. They note that Mr. Calderon has adopted strategies that worked in Colombia in the 1990s: using the military to take back regions where drug dealers control the local authorities, extraditing top cartel members to the United States and eradicating crops of marijuana and poppies.” (McKinley, 2007)

This last statement reflects another common sexenio pattern. The United States frequently offers very specific recommendations for Mexican policy. While the US has requested wide-ranging policy reform – such as the adoption of conspiracy laws, asset forfeiture procedures, and judicial restructuring – the US government has not rethought the basic law enforcement approach. For instance, in one of the first reviews (GAO, 1974), the Mexican government is praised for increased drug seizures, providing better information to the US about drug trafficking, and increased cooperation. However, the Report noted problems such as “lack of full cooperation between the two Governments regarding drug information and extradition” as well as “limited technical resources and manpower.” (GAO, 1974: ii) This Report also notes that the Mexican government planned to “restructure the police force” in order to eliminate corruption that arose from poor working conditions, low pay, and a lack of benefits (GAO, 1974: 18-19). Likewise, the GAO recommends that the US provide helicopters to increase the resources available to the Mexican government. And, as the most recent GAO report on Mexican counter narcotics efforts notes, “Since 1990, NAS (Narcotics Affairs Section) has provided ... helicopters ... for transporting law enforcement personnel to interdict drug trafficking” to the Mexican Attorney General’s Office (GAO, 2007: 32). However, the same report notes that the program “did not meet its target” (32) and neither the US Defense Department nor the Department of State’s International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs bureau would continue to fund the helicopter program.

This process recurs. The US government recommends something intended to make Mexican drug policy (more) successful; the Mexican government adopts the recommendation – sometimes quickly, other times after years; then, the recommended program fails to make a substantial difference. This can be seen in various areas. For instance, the United States government has argued that “[e]ffective extradition treaties between the United States and other countries are essential to bring illicit drug producers and traffickers to justice” (GAO 1988: 21) As noted in an early report, “in 1971 legal experts from the Departments of State and Justice went to Mexico and discussed the extradition problem with their Mexican counterparts.” (GAO, 1974: 29) Indeed, in 1973 the GAO recommended that the Department of State should persuade the Government of Mexico “to honor US government requests for extradition of its citizens for violations of US drug laws.” (GAO, 1973: 25) US pressure on extradition was consistent but progress was slow. In 1998, in GAO testimony, the government applauded the fact that

Mexico, with U.S. assistance, has taken steps to improve its capacity to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States.

Among other things, the Mexican government has taken action that could potentially lead to the extradition of drug criminals to the United States (GAO, 1998: 1)

Previously, Mexican policy and court decisions more or less prohibited the extradition of Mexican nationals wanted for crimes committed abroad; rather, these people were to be prosecuted in Mexico. However, the Zedillo Administration broke new ground by extraditing seven Mexican nationals and one dual U.S.-Mexican national to the United States between 1996 and 2000. By the time of the Fox Administration, extraditions of Mexican citizens were increasingly taking place. Yet, this policy adoption has yet to substantially reduce drug trafficking into the United States from Mexico, as the title of the most recent GAO report on Mexican counternarcotics reveals: “US Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts, but Tons of Illicit Drugs Continue to Flow into the United States”. (GAO, 2007) Indeed, one could argue that drug trafficking from Mexico is worst now, after more than three decades of US assistance.

US government requests, Mexican government adopts, and the drug war continues to fail. US advice encompasses the whole scope of drug war tactics. The Mexican government – typically at the behest of the US government – has engaged in significant police reform over the years. New bureaus have been created, old one consolidated, and the US government enlisted in recruitment, screening, and training of Mexican drug enforcement officials. Despite the involvement of the US, police corruption continues to plague Mexico at the federal and local level:

Some agents of Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency (AFI) are believed to work as enforcers for the Sinaloa cartel, and the Attorney General's Office (PGR) reported in December 2005 that one-fifth of its officers are under investigation for criminal activity. The PGR reported in late 2005 that nearly 1,500 of AFI's 7,000 agents were under investigation for suspected criminal activity and 457 were facing charges. ... the Mexican federal government conducted purges and prosecution of police forces in Nuevo Laredo; Apatzingan, Michoacán; and, Tijuana, Baja California. ... Federal officers arriving in Nuevo Laredo were fired on by municipal police leading to the arrest of 41 municipal police and the suspension of the entire 700-member Nuevo Laredo police force to investigate corruption. (Cook, 2007: 9-10)

However, the US government continues to be confident that police corruption can be eradicated with the appropriately tough policies. As might be expected, the new sexenio is seen as an opportunity for success:

In June 2007, President Calderón purged 284 federal police commanders, including federal commanders of all 31 states and the federal district. These commanders were suspended

and subjected to drug and polygraph tests. The Mexican government immediately named replacements for the 284 dismissed commanders. The new commanders all successfully passed an array of examinations designed to weed out corrupt officers, including financial checks, drug testing, and psychological and medical screening. These tests are to be repeated on a regular basis. (Cook, 2007: 10)

A staggeringly long list of policy changes has been proffered by the United States. These recommendations include the development of money laundering laws, asset forfeiture provisions, “kingpin” targeting strategy, as well as greater reliance on the military. (See, for instance, Constantine, 1996 for an example of the changes the United States viewed as critical for success in Mexico.) From the perspective of the United States, it was “very important that the Mexican government expeditiously enact similar legislation to afford their law enforcement agencies adequate laws and legal authority to successfully investigate and prosecute major drug traffickers.” (Constantine, 1996) Yet, the adoption of these measures and the multiple reforms of the Mexican law enforcement agencies have not resulted in success. After bowing to US requests to screen Mexican officials working for Mexican law enforcement agencies, the United States reported that “[w]ith the Mexican Vetted Unit Program entering its third year, it was mutually recognized that the program had not achieved the level of effectiveness originally envisioned.” (Department of State, INCSR 1999)

A review of US assessment of Mexican drug enforcement reveals contradictory advice. For instance, the United States at times encourages the involvement of the Mexican military in counter narcotics efforts. Moves in 1995 were welcomed by the United States:

Mexican and American officials said that during the last two months, army generals have taken part more extensively in a redesign of the Government's drug-control strategy. ... "In the past, there was always a reluctance to allow the military to play a stronger role," a United States official said today. "But with the Zedillo administration, that mindset has dissolved." (Golden, 1995)

The US continues to foster a militarization of the drug war in Mexico. In early October 2007, Mexico's Deputy Foreign Minister for North American Affairs, Carlos Rico, announced that the United States would provide \$1 billion in military assistance to combat drug cartels. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere, Stephen Johnson “noted that the aid program would be a ‘historic’ opportunity to improve U.S.-Mexico relations and cooperation.” (Cook, 2007: 16-17) Yet, in 1997 the US government expresses doubts about the “wisdom of President Ernesto Zedillo’s policy of entrusting more and more of the drug war to the armed forces” (Preston, 1997) This skepticism seemed warranted after the arrest of the head of

Mexico's anti-narcotics program, General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo. Yet, the United States in its most recent program (the Merida Initiative) lauds the Mexican military as "better suited to interdict drug shipments" than the Mexican police. (Roig-Franzia, 2007) Such contradictions doesn't even take into consideration the stinging critique of militarization of the drug war by non-US government entities (see, for instance, Freeman, 2002 and 2006).

While the pattern of US evaluation of Mexican counter narcotics is clear, what about the war on drugs? What does the evidence suggest with regard to the success of Mexico's war on drugs? The amount of data available for analysis is tremendous. One can view information about arrests, seizures, and extradition. On the following pages are graphical representations of the Mexican war on drugs in all of these areas. Several interesting conclusions can be drawn. However, it is important to begin with a caveat well expressed in a Congressional Research Service report:

Caution should be exercised in considering the changes in the various areas as an indication of Mexico's seriousness in controlling drug trafficking. The trends may also be affected by the demand for the drugs, the amount of drugs produced or available, the sophistication of the drug traffickers, the intelligence and capabilities of Mexican counter-drug agencies, the effectiveness of reporting and monitoring methods, the effect of weather conditions on eradication efforts, and competition from alternative drug suppliers. (Storrs, 2001: 3)

Comparing US verbal evaluations to the annual evidence of arrests, seizures, and extradition is instructive. Overall, there is some variation between and within sexenios. On the whole, though, it does not follow US rhetoric. A comparison of trend lines versus moving averages suggests that the year to year focus of US evaluations misses the larger picture. For example, while arrests can vary from year to year, the overall trend is flat.

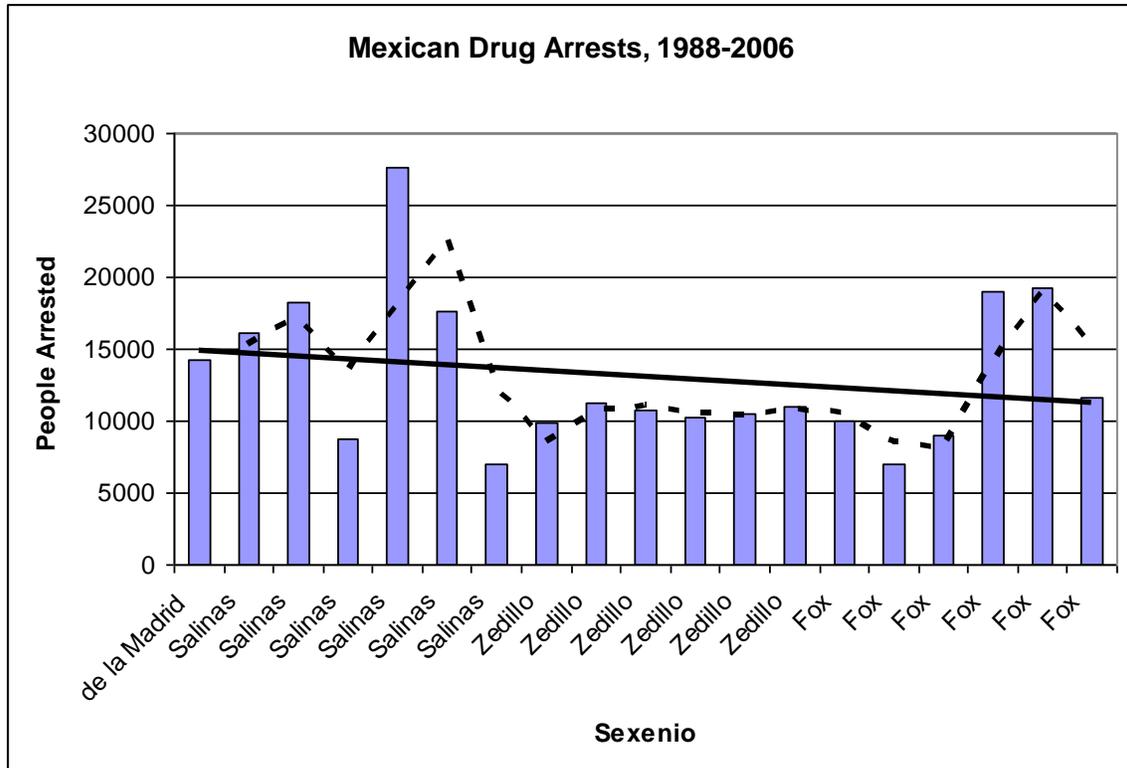


Figure 1: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author.

Some data that initially seems promising can actually be disappointing. Figure 2, detailing marijuana seizures, shows a steady upward trend from 1988 to 2006. However, one of the earliest objectives of the United States has been to “[c]onvince the Mexican government to reorder its priorities to give top and predominant attention to ‘hard’ drugs rather than marihuana (*sic*)” (GAO, 1974: 14) Thus, the data suggests that the US has been unable to achieve this objective – especially when compared to other seizure data.

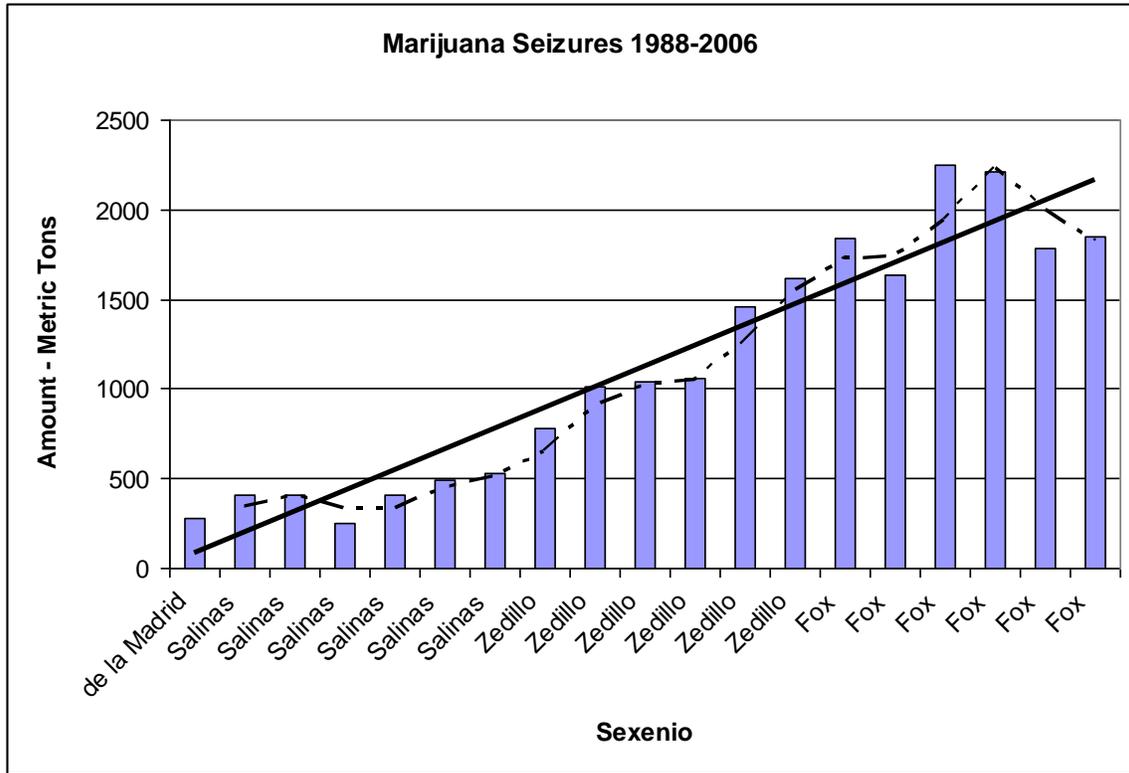


Figure 2: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author

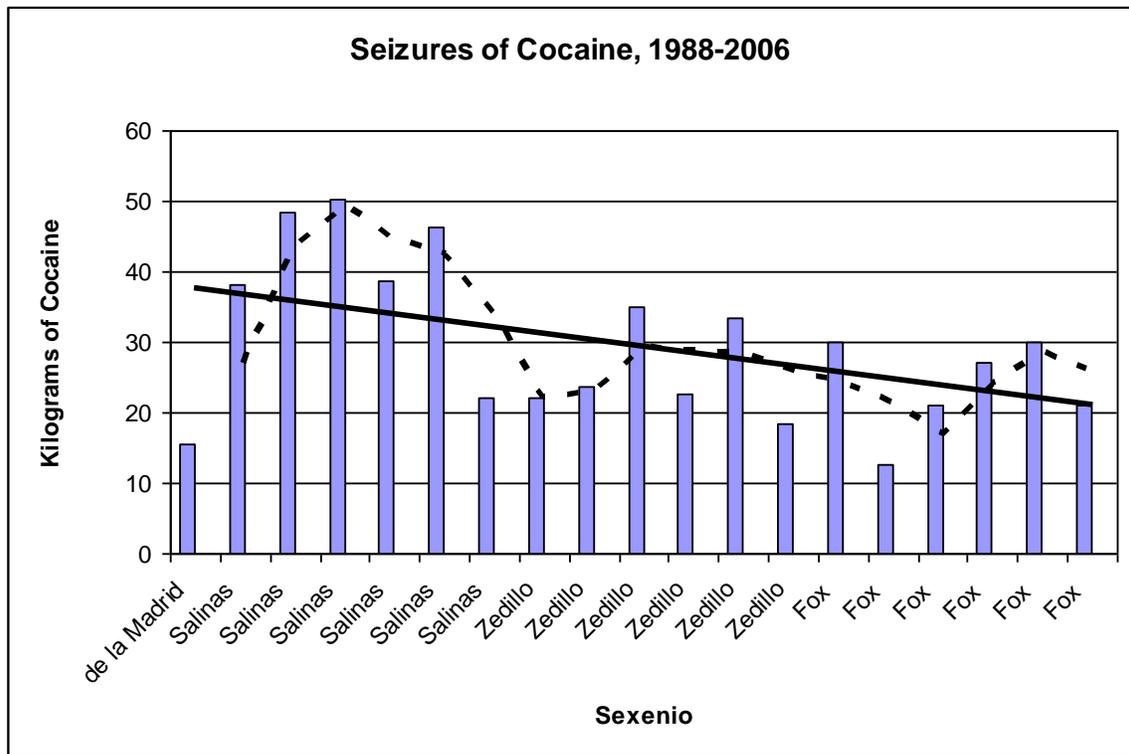


Figure 3: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author

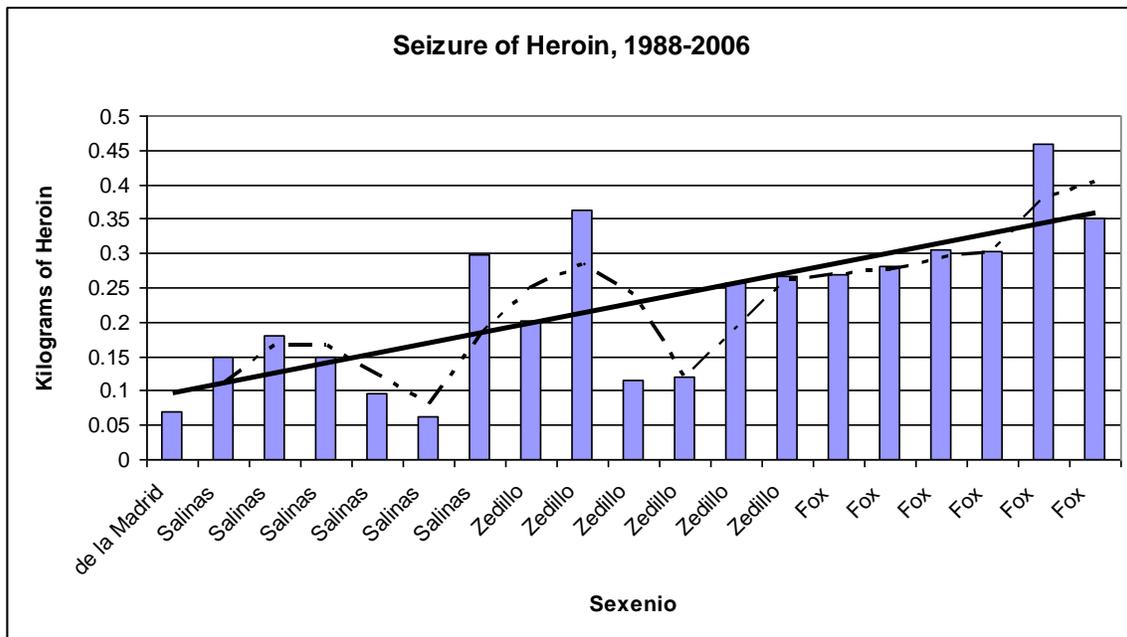


Figure 4: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author

Despite annual variation, the trend for cocaine seizures is down (or flat, at best). Heroin seizures are trending upwards, though. However, the United States emphasizes that cocaine trafficking is the critical focus of US anti-drug efforts: as noted in the latest available INCSR, about 90% of all cocaine consumed in the United States comes via Mexico. Thus, the failure to interdict suggests limited impact on cocaine supplied here in the United States. Increasingly, the US has also concentrated upon methamphetamines. The United States government recently noted that there has been a “shift of the manufacture and trafficking of methamphetamine and its precursors into Mexico” (Department of State, INCSR 2007). As Figure 5 shows, Mexican seizures have been increasing over time. However, at present, Mexico is not the major source of methamphetamine for the United States, thus calling into question how effective Mexican interdiction of methamphetamine is for supply disruption in the United States.

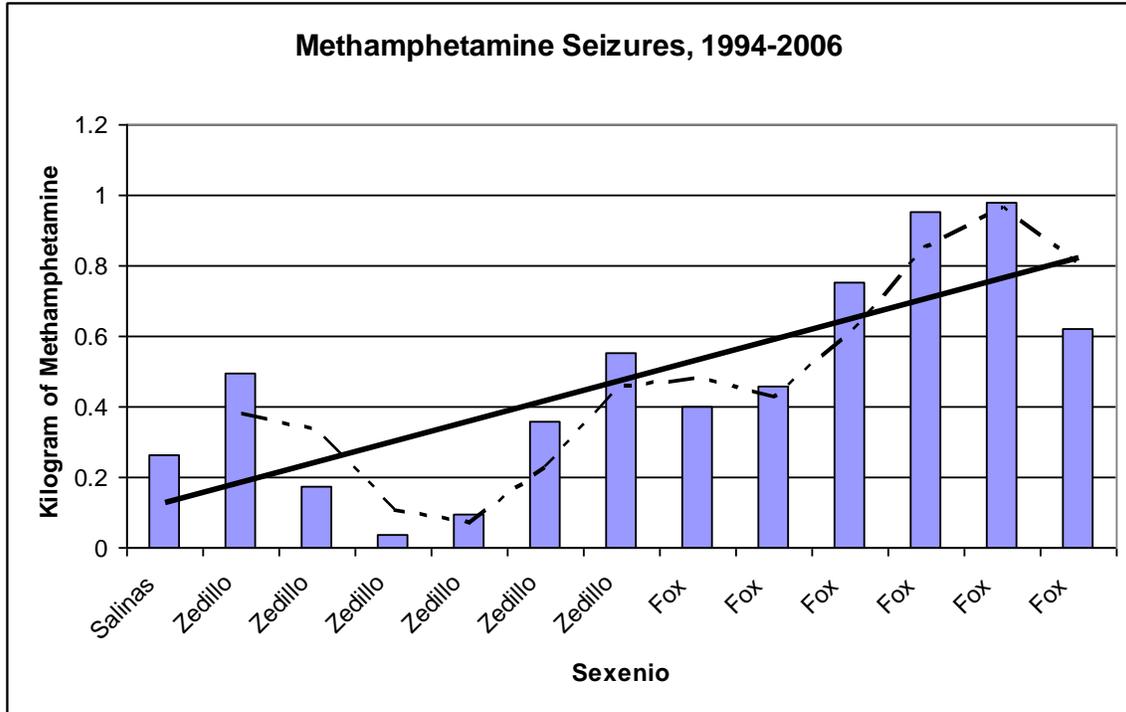


Figure 5: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author

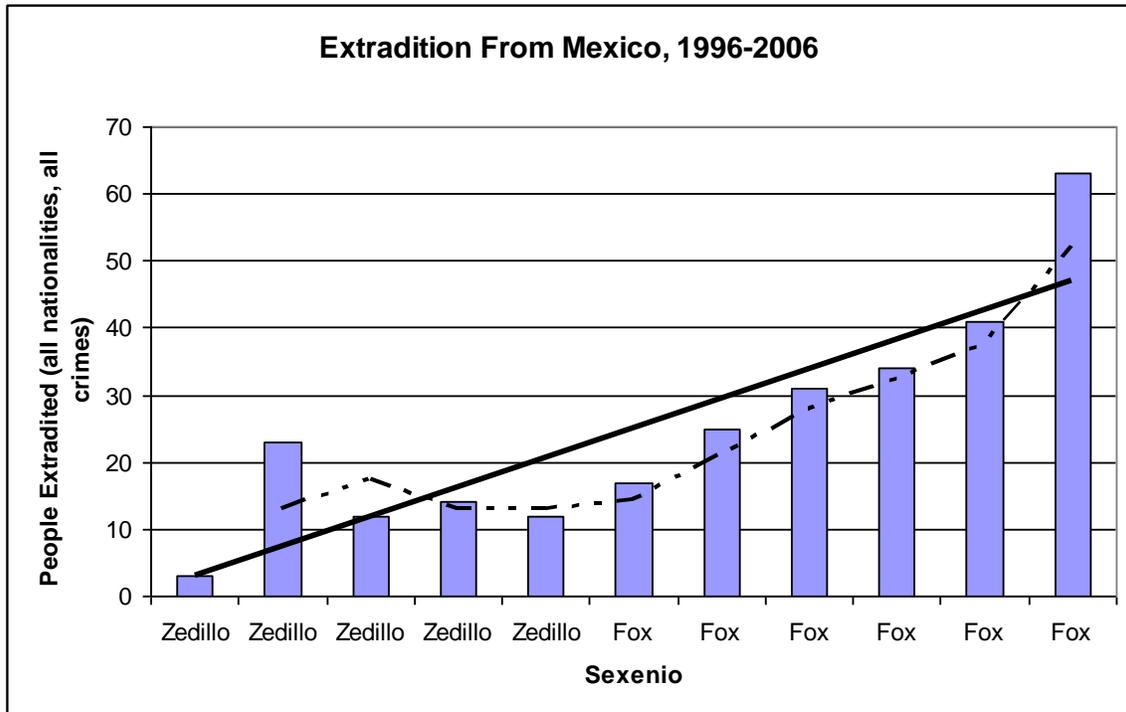


Figure 6: Data from Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports; trend line and moving average calculated by author

Extradition is clearly increasing. As of yet, though, there has been no impact upon the drug trafficking. Indeed, in a recent report to Congress, it was stated that “[t]he National Drug Intelligence Center now considers Mexican drug cartels as dominating the U.S. illicit drug market.” (Cook, 2007: 4) While data about drug flows are not as documented as arrests, seizures, and extradition, the United States noted that Mexico was the principal transit route for South American cocaine, with an estimated “50 to 70 percent of the cocaine smuggled into the U.S.” transiting through Mexico in 1993 (State Department, 1993 INCSR) By 2006, that figure had *increased*, not decreased. The latest report asserts that 90% of the cocaine flowing into the US comes through Mexico.

While there have been minor variations, the overall trend in cocaine prices and purity suggests that counternarcotics efforts are not having the intended effect. Data compiled by the Washington Office on Latin America data suggests that the trend for price and purity is opposite of what the counter narcotic policy seeks.

US Retail Prices of Cocaine and Crack

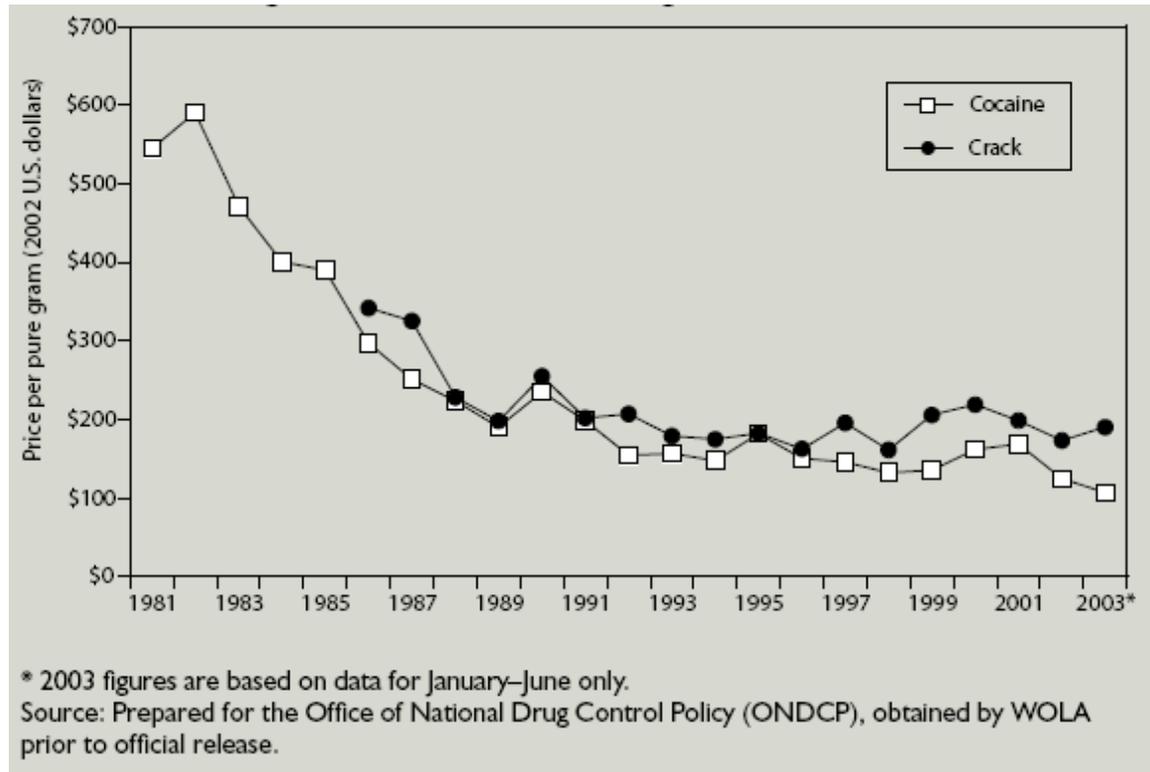


Figure 7: Reprinted from Walsh, 2004: 4

The data with regard to price and purity is especially important. Increasing price and decreasing purity are supposed to lead to reduced drug consumption. This is the logic of a supply-side approach. If, as this data suggests, prices are declining and purity is unaffected, then the supply-side process is not working as hypothesized.

Purity of Retail Cocaine, Crack, and Heroin

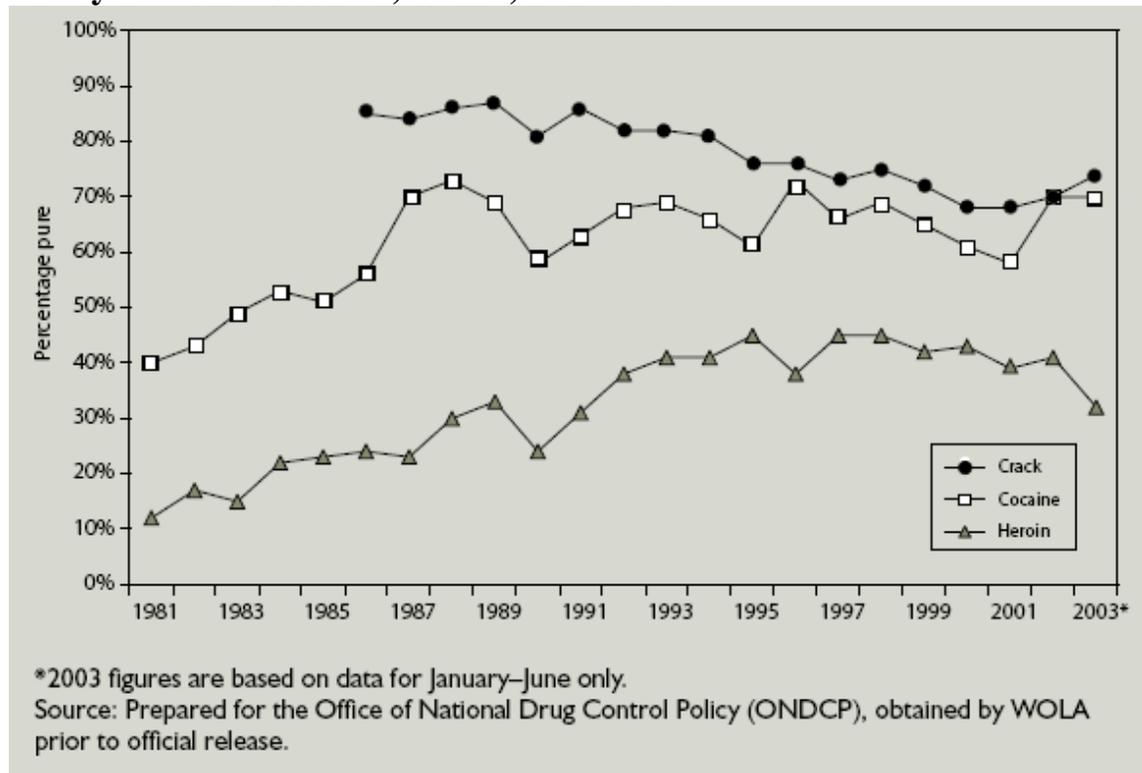


Figure 8: Reprinted from Walsh, 2004: 5

Implications of US Rhetoric and Counternarcotics Evidence

Listening to the United States government, one might think that a change in personnel, accompanied by changes in law could be the key to drug war success in Mexico. A long term study of US government evaluations, though, indicates that this is not the case. Since the GAO report in 1974, almost every demand by the US with regard the Mexican counternarcotics policy has been adopted. Law enforcement agencies have been restructured, recruited, screened, and trained by the United States. Conspiracy laws have been passed, as have asset forfeiture rules. Increasingly, the Mexican military has been brought into the fight against drugs. In many ways, Mexico has mirrored efforts undertaken within the United States to fight drugs. Yet, to date, taking US advice has not translated into success.

For some, this failure was anticipated. If one places drug trafficking into a framework of political economy rather than social deviance, the flaws of a supply-side approach are clear. (See Mares, 2006, especially Chapter 2 for a discussion of the impact of analytical perspectives on policy development, implementation, and assessment.) Writing almost two decades ago, Milton Friedman predicted that a supply-side, punitive, law enforcement approach would not work:

Of course the problem is demand, but it is not only demand, it is demand that must operate through repressed and illegal channels. Illegality creates obscene profits that finance the murderous tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials; illegality monopolizes the efforts of honest law forces so that they are starved for resources to fight the simpler crimes of robbery, theft and assault. Drugs are a tragedy for addicts. But criminalizing their use converts that tragedy into a disaster for society, for users and non-users alike. Our experience with the prohibition of drugs is a replay of our experience with the prohibition of alcoholic beverages. (Friedman, 1989)

In essence, the drug war seeks to overturn the law of supply and demand. And, the evidence suggests that it has not been able to achieve this. Thus, the political willingness of Mexican leaders should not be called into question. Rather, the US should recognize that politics is the art of the possible. Thus, Mexican leaders may only find it possible to punish past behaviors rather than prevent new ones from arising. Corruption can be tackled only after the fact; the economics of the situation suggest that it cannot be prevented.

The prognosis for the Calderon sexenio, based on the pattern, is as follows. President Calderon will garner great support in the United States for his tough stance against drugs. Over the six years, though, drug cartels will adapt to the situation, establish new routines, and finesse the new situation. Even if drug trafficking diminishes in Mexico (as it did in the Caribbean in the late 1980s), the evidence suggests that the flow will be *diverted* through a new path, not eliminated. Already there is some evidence to suggest that the Caribbean is re-emerging as a key transit zone, thanks to the increased emphasis on the US-Mexico border. Thus, no one should be surprised that at present the US government asserts that

When President Calderon came into office, he made clear that the fight against organized crime was a priority. To date his actions have spoken even more loudly and underscore his determination and dedication to success in this fight. (Department of State, 2007a).

Likewise, no one should be surprised if the US government's assessment in 2011 reflects disappointment with the achievements of the Calderon administration and sincere hopes that a new administration will prove to be more effective.

The evidence suggests that it is the policy itself, not its implementation, which is flawed. Is there evidence that underlying policy will change?

At present, the evidence is contradictory. Within Mexico, there are loud voices, which have been speaking out over the years, critical of the US approach to the drug war. Frequently, the Mexican president himself joins in the criticism. This has occurred in every presidential sexenio -- Salinas, Zedillo, Fox, and even Calderon (see, for instance, Cook, 2007: 16-17). In Mexico, under the Fox Administration, the government attempted to merge the US-style punitive drug ware approach with European harm reduction approach. The Mexican Congress debated and approved legislation for drug use decriminalization. The effort was touted as a way to be more effective in the drug war but concentrating efforts on violent, drug trafficking offenders. For student of US – Latin American relations, the sequence of events that then transpired were very instructive. Initially, it appeared that the legislation would become law; Congress had passed it easily and President Fox was expected to sign it into law. After all, the law had been offered to the legislature from the president’s office and had been introduced onto the floor by his own political party, PAN. However, just a day after President Fox had publically stated he would sign the legislation, President Fox returned the legislation to Congress, requesting that the legislation should be amended to make drug possession and use illegal. What accounts for this dramatic turn of events? Observers noted the role of the United States in this policy reversal:

... US embassy spokesperson Judith Bryan said US officials had "urged Mexican representatives to review the legislation urgently, to avoid the perception that drug-use would be tolerated in Mexico, and to prevent drug tourism". (BBC News, 2006)

This can be viewed as a template for what *any* Mexican government would face if it attempts any autonomous efforts to alter drug policy: quick, severe, and concrete pressure by the United States to return to US-approved policies. Given the overwhelming role played by the United States in Mexico – which has only deepened in the post-NAFTA era – the chances of Mexico successfully resisting the United States are slim.

Thus, until the United States itself rethinks its punitive drug enforcement policy, it seems that Mexican sexenios are doomed to “bright beginnings” with “failed finales” in its drug war.

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