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The Merida Initiative: An Effective Way of Reducing Violence in Mexico?

Sabrina Abu-Hamdeh

In recent decades, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico have had the dubious honor of being key players in the global drug market. Today, South America is the lone producer of cocaine for the world. Mexico and Colombia provide the United States with its primary source of opiates and play central roles in the marijuana trade and the foreign production of methamphetamines.¹ The main pathway for illegal drugs to enter the United States is the Central America-Mexico corridor, where it is estimated that ninety percent of all the cocaine entering the United States arrives. As a result, the Latin American drug trade is big business: Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations make an estimated \$18 to \$39 billion annually in wholesale drug profits.² In 2008, the National Drug Intelligence Center reported that Mexican drug trafficking organizations are the “greatest organized crime threat” to the United States today, due to the increased distribution and transportation networks Mexican cartels have put in place to meet US need.³

After the inauguration of Mexican President Felipe Calderon in 2006, and his subsequent pledge to battle corruption and drug trafficking, drug violence surged in areas dominated by the most prominent drug organizations. The death toll rose as these groups fought each other and the Mexican government for coveted control of lucrative drug routes. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released a report stating that, though crime rates and homicides decreased worldwide, homicides increased in Latin America, Mexico and the Caribbean from 19.9 per

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100,000 in 2003 to 32.6 per 100,000 in 2008.⁴ According to recent studies, income inequality, political instability and crime have all contributed to the increases in violence, but the major factor is the drug trade. Exact numbers of drug-related deaths are disputed, but according to the Trans-Border Institute at the University of California, San Diego, there were 2,120 Mexican cartel-related homicides in 2006; 2,280 in 2007; 5,153 in 2008; 6,587 in 2009; and already the highest number yet in 2010 with 5,775. Since 2007, shortly after President Calderon's declaration of a war on drugs, an estimated 28,228 drug trade related deaths have been reported.⁵

Increased anxiety over the escalating violence and increased drug trafficking between US border states and northern Mexico led US lawmakers to create anti-drug assistance programs to lessen drug-related violence and drug trafficking into the United States. These programs met with little success as increased internal corruption, ever more powerful drug cartels, and increased poverty plagued Mexico. With relations continuing to cool between the United States and Mexico, President Calderon extended an olive branch in 2007 and requested the help of the United States with counterdrug efforts and assistance.⁶ He also pointedly remarked on the United States' role as a major consumer of Mexican drugs when he stated at the Merida Conference, "While there is no reduction in demand in your territory, it will be very difficult to reduce the supply in ours."⁷

In October 2007, the United States and Mexico announced the Merida Initiative, a \$1.4 billion proposal for US assistance in Mexico and Central America's drug war for FY 2008-FY 2010.⁸ For the 2008 fiscal year, Congress allocated \$400 million for Mexico and \$65 million for Central America. This marked a shift in US foreign drug policy, as until this time Colombia had been the main recipient of US aid, not Mexico. According to the US Department of State, Colombia received \$600 million for FY 2006, while Mexico received approximately \$40 million.⁹ As the US enters its fourth year of Merida Initiative implementation, it is important to assess whether or not it has been a successful policy. The intention of the United States and Mexico was to reduce the drug trafficking problem, cartel influence, and associated violence and corruption, while restoring order to much of Mexico through implementation of the initiative. This paper

will address the viability of the Merida Initiative as an effective policy for reducing continued drug-related violence and homicide in Mexico.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though extensive literature surrounds the Merida Initiative, the focus of this analysis will be three aspects of the program: the background of the proposal, the implementation and accountability of the program, and critiques of the program as a counter-drug policy.

The Merida Initiative was intensely debated in Congress; lawmakers were hesitant to pass an aid proposal in light of the Mexican history of government corruption. Proponents of the initiative stressed that equipment and training, rather than direct cash transfers, would be offered to Mexico in an effort to curtail potential corruption.¹⁰ The goal of the proposal was to maximize the effectiveness of already existing programs to curb drug, human, and weapons trafficking through four different types of funding: counternarcotics/counterterrorism/border security; public security/law enforcement; institution building; and rule of law and program support. At its inception, the main objectives of the Merida Initiative were to: 1) break the power and impunity of criminal organizations; 2) strengthen border, air and maritime controls; 3) improve the capacity of justice systems in the region; and 4) curtail gang activity and diminish local drug demand.¹¹

No additional funding for US anti-drug efforts was appropriated in the initiative, though the document cited several US counterdrug programs already in place.¹² The result of both Senate and House of Representatives amendments to the proposed initiative was approval of \$400 million for Mexico and \$65 million for Central America, the Dominican Republic and Haiti in 2008, and \$300 million for Mexico and \$110 for Central America, the Dominican Republic and Haiti for 2009.¹³ For FY 2010, \$210.9 million was allotted to Mexico due to additional appropriations given to Mexico in FY 2009 in supplemental funding. This money was carried forward into the next year.¹⁴ The final year of the initiative was to be 2010, and it was intended that successor programs—including post-Merida support to Mexico, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)—would take up where the

Merida Initiative had left off.

The process of procuring funding from Congress for the first year of the program was ultimately easier than service delivery itself. Since the initiative stipulated no cash transfers or money disbursement to the recipient countries, it fell to the State Department and other government agencies to facilitate service delivery through new and existing programs in Mexico. On July 10, 2010, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report outlining the success of disbursement of the Merida funds allocated to Mexico. The report found that, “as of March 31, 2010, 46 percent of Merida funds for fiscal years 2008 to 2010 had been obligated, and approximately 9 percent had been expended.”¹⁵ US agencies had delivered the major equipment stipulated in the initiative, including five Bell helicopters, X-ray inspection devices, law enforcement canines, and training for more than 4,000 police officers to the Mexican government. These positive findings, however, were limited as the report also found that an insufficient number of available staff to administer programs and ensure seamless equipment delivery, slow negotiations and contract disbursement, changes in governments and funding availability all hampered implementation of the Merida Initiative. The GAO had first reported problems with service delivery process in December 2009, at the behest of Congress, whose concern over the implementation of the Initiative was mounting.¹⁶ Since the release of the original GAO report, the pace of service delivery has increased, as noted in the updated July 2010 report.

In assessing the Merida Initiative, the GAO found that its strategic documents were missing important elements necessary for accountability, and in many cases, for the success of the program. It found that performance measures indicating progress had not been built into program documents. No timelines were set as gauges of success, and equipment and training was provided without such measures of accountability in place.¹⁷ In response to these findings, the GAO recommended that outcome performance measures such as timelines or other indicators of program success be included in Merida Initiative strategy to ensure more efficient service delivery. After initial arguments by the Department of State regarding the GAO’s heavy

use of “expended funds” as the primary measure of performance, it agreed with the recommendations put forth by the GAO.¹⁸

Beyond issues of policy implementation, there remains the question of the Merida Initiative’s effectiveness as a drug control policy. Modeled in part on Plan Colombia, it was touted as the answer to the rising international drug problem that had seemingly been reduced in Colombia by the Plan. Unfortunately, according to a GAO report released in 2008, the success of Plan Colombia as a drug reduction plan was not found to be entirely true, though as a security program for Colombia it was successful. The goal of Plan Colombia was to reduce drug cultivation, processing and distribution by fifty percent between FY 2000 and FY 2006. By 2006, heroine production had been reduced by 15 percent, but coca cultivation had increased by fifteen percent and distribution had increased by four percent.¹⁹ The funding emphasis of Plan Colombia was on military aid with \$4.9 billion allocated to military assistance and only \$1.3 billion for justice, social and economic programs that included alternative development programs for displaced drug workers.²⁰ The GAO ultimately recommended a more integrated approach for the plan’s programs to facilitate a more seamless transition to Colombian control. Additionally, as in the case of the Merida report, it recommended tangible performance measures of the program to ensure satisfactory outcomes and self sustaining alternative development programs. The GAO emphasized a report issued by the US Embassy in Bogota, which warned that any program gains would be temporary until a stable government not prone to manipulation could be established. The Merida Initiative has followed a trajectory similar to that of Plan Colombia during its short duration, as its initial funding was focused on military aid.

Additionally, the ideology underlying the Merida Initiative has been questioned. While on paper, the Merida Initiative appeared quite clear in its intentions, according to Diana Villiers Negroponete, the allocation of Merida Initiative funds suggested that the principal interest of the United States was in counternarcotics and counterterrorism.²¹ Villiers Negroponete questions the way in which the Merida Initiative addressed the more contemporary issues of organized crime and cartels prevalent in Mexico. She did, however, applaud the Merida Initiative drafters’

recognition of the need for the use of more advanced technology in judicial and police situations and the need for a grassroots approach to program implementation, because a top-down approach can be alienating, not unlike the gang mentality to which many people are accustomed.²² The Merida Initiative's shortcomings highlight the illegal weapons flow into Mexico from the United States – something Villiers Negroponte finds as an essential part of the drug-related violence in Mexico. No Merida funding was allocated toward domestic policy.

George Grayson discusses mounting drug violence, cartel power and recent attempts (including the Merida Initiative) by President Felipe Calderon to battle the seemingly unstoppable drug trafficking organizations, and whether or not Mexico can overcome such obstacles.²³ In order for Mexico not to become a “failed state” as Grayson suggests is possible, Calderon must take control of Mexico back from the drug cartels through several strategies implemented concurrently. He recommends continuing the war on drugs while exploring other alternatives, such as legalizing certain drugs in a tradeoff for halted drug-related violence in a type of *modus vivendi*. At the same time, he calls for focus on the demand side, through increased education and treatment in the United States and Mexico. Grayson suggests that the possibility of decriminalization of certain narcotics – such as marijuana – in the US could help lessen demand from Mexico and has stated that, “the least bad policy is to legalize drugs.”²⁴

POLICY ANALYSIS

The Merida Initiative came at an important moment for both the United States and Mexico. It signified a much needed collaboration and acceptance between both countries, by the acknowledgment of their mutual shortcomings and their pledge to aid one another. Both countries realized that the futures of their societies were tied, and a significant yet unintended consequence of the Initiative has been to improve relations between the governments of the United States and Mexico. The first objective of the initiative was to reduce drug violence and the second was to reduce drug trafficking into the United States by aiding the Mexican government's fight with the drug cartels. An indirect goal of the Merida Initiative was to lessen

the demand for drugs in the United States through minimized supply. The unfortunate truth is that neither goal of the initiative has yet been successful. There are multiple reasons, which include flawed implementation yielding limited positive outcomes; the short duration and the small scope of the aid program; the limited effects the policy has on domestic drug policy and demand reduction; and the mounting drug-related violence prevalent in Mexico.

A Carnevale Associates study of US drug policy found that consumption from 2002 to 2008 had not changed and remains at eight percent of Americans aged twelve and older.²⁵ It also showed that, though consumption has remained the same, federal spending for supply reduction rose by sixty-four percent whereas spending on demand reduction only rose by nine percent. In light of these bleak statistics, the Obama administration needs to assess its drug policy and decide the future of the Merida Initiative.

Various policy alternatives exist for the Merida Initiative at this juncture. This paper will address the three most plausible options in turn, and review the effectiveness of each policy within the established criteria. The first option is to abandon the program by allowing funding to expire, as it was originally allocated through FY 2010 and has been extended until FY 2011. The second option is to continue with the Obama administration's approach to the Merida Initiative, called "Beyond Merida." This policy embodies the Merida Initiative's original goals, but integrates a "shared responsibility" approach to drug control and a larger focus on institution building rather than military spending. The third option is a new approach that integrates aspects of President Obama's "Beyond Merida" approach, but focuses more on domestic drug and weapons policy as means of lessening demand, and institution building and government support as means of lessening the supply.

The criteria used to determine the best policy incorporates the basic economic principles of supply and demand. The theory of supply and demand is fundamental in explaining market economies and most societal outcomes. The problem of drug violence in Mexico can be attributed to heightened demand that has fueled a larger supply. A successful policy would lessen supply through decreased drug production and cross border

trafficking. For this to happen, there must be decreased demand – notably, within the United States. The desired outcome is a reduction in violence in Mexico from drug-related activities and a lessened supply of illegal drugs.

Abandoning the Merida Initiative would be an easy solution, since the program’s implementation has caused much concern in Congress and many headaches in the State Department. The feasibility of successfully implementing programs in Mexico and providing enough military assistance and training to have an impact has proven daunting for the State Department, with so many agencies to coordinate and contracts to negotiate. This is evident in the GAO’s damning report, which stated that the Merida Initiative has not been at all successful, since the bulk of the money allocated to the program has not yet been spent. There also have not been concrete evaluations of program success, such as the establishment of timelines to facilitate accountability.

Violence has escalated alarmingly in Mexico and the “spillover” of drug violence into the United States is palpable. In discussing the limitations of the Merida Initiative, Villiers Negroponete highlights the flow of illegal weapons into Mexico from the United States and how this is not adequately addressed in the initiative.²⁶ This shortcoming highlights a failure of one of the criterion: lessened demand. Illegal weapons trafficking is a direct result of the increasing drug trade and turf wars in Mexico. Merida funds cannot be used for domestic use, including gun policy; therefore, strengthening US domestic policy is essential for foreign drug policy success. An example of a program already in place is Project Gunrunner, which was designed to stop the flow of illegal weapons from the United States to Mexico. A report of US Justice Department’s Inspector General found, however, that Project Gunrunner has been largely ineffective due to insufficient communication between federal agencies and the inability to target “high-profile” drug traffickers.²⁷ The desired outcome of reduced violence in Mexico has clearly not been reached.

The Merida Initiative has also failed to reduce supply. Analysis has shown that some US policies have actually increased trafficking. Major interdiction efforts on the part of the United States closed Florida as an entry point for Colombian cocaine, but left Mexico as an attractive substitute.

Small-time Mexican drug dealers reaped the rewards and evolved to become the leaders of sophisticated and violent cartels.²⁸ Overall, drug demand has remained the same and drug supply has increased. Meyer suggests that the Merida Initiative applied the same principles of military-focused aid to fight drug trafficking, similar to previous unsuccessful policies implemented in Mexico by the Mexican government.²⁹ This suggests that the program was doomed from the start. On the other hand, to abandon a program that has only been partially implemented would be a complete waste of funds. As observed in the success of Plan Colombia, the length of the program has as much to do with its success as does the transition of the program to a nationally run self-sustaining entity.³⁰

A second policy option is the Obama administration's strategy of following the model of the Merida Initiative, with the inclusion of a more bilateral collaborative approach.³¹ This approach is often referred to as "Beyond Merida" and is founded on the "four pillars" first articulated by President Obama when he made his FY 2011 budget request. In keeping with the "Beyond Merida" rationale of maintaining successful elements and changing what does not work, Obama called for refinements of the initial program to ensure more widespread success and an expanded approach to counterdrug efforts.³² The new approach would be more focused on "institution building" than military equipment expenditures — the bulk of the Merida Initiative's past spending. The four pillars include:

- 1) **Disrupting and dismantling criminal organizations** by viewing them as corporations and disrupting the arms trading originating in the United States
- 2) **Institutionalizing the rule of law** by doubling the budget allotted for Mexican development of strong institutions
- 3) **Building a twenty-first century border** by changing the definition of a border from a simple geographic delineation to one of "secure flows." This would entail moving the location of customs and security away from the border to a central city and leaving the border as merely a place to "focus on preventing the entrance of dangerous illicit flows"³³
- 4) **Building strong and resilient communities** through social and

economic reforms that range from job creation and neighborhood zoning to expanded daycare³⁴

In her assessment, Villiers Negroponte concludes that while the Merida Initiative is a step in the right direction, it is not enough to successfully curtail drug trafficking and violence.³⁵ Once the United States' tenure ends, success will be hinged upon the strength of democratic societies' strong governments, their implementation of consistent policies and wealth redistribution, supported by long lasting programs with built-in local support. The "Beyond Merida" approach incorporates the ideas outlined by Villiers Negroponte. If successful in the long term, the pillars of the "Beyond Merida" approach could affect the supply side of drug trafficking. The evolved policy is ambitious in its aims and would require a sustained effort on the part of the United States for its success. The policy does address weapons trafficking originating in the United States, but has not thus far implemented any policy successful in lessening illegal arms trading. Unfortunately, the Obama plan is glaringly lacking in its response to the call for "shared responsibility" in addressing drug demand.

According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), the prevalence of illicit drugs in the United States will not diminish in the near future, but will in fact increase due to growing demand and increased production in Mexico. The only drug that will not be produced in increased amounts is cocaine, due to shortages felt in Latin America rather than a decrease in demand. In fact, global demand has increased as Europe has discovered cocaine.³⁶ The NDIC found that, "the growing strength and organization of criminal gangs, including their alliances with large Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), will make disrupting illicit drug availability and distribution increasingly difficult for law enforcement agencies."³⁷ The Mexican government under President Calderon has fought DTOs with some success by limiting internal corruption, but corruption is so widespread and the power of the cartels so great that this fight will be long. When one cartel leader is arrested, others rise to take his place, waging violent battles against each other in cities such as Ciudad Juarez. It is estimated that, though thousands of soldiers have been committed by President Calderon and millions of US dollars have been given in funding,

less than one percent of the billions of dollars in drug money smuggled into the United States every year is seized.³⁸ These disheartening statistics suggest that the “Beyond Merida” approach has failed the criteria of reduced demand leading to lessened supply.

Unfortunately, drug trafficking and cartel-related violence has continued to rise; this raises the question of whether the Obama administration's policy has been successful. US officials have claimed that drug demand has gone down in the United States and this has increased violence in Mexico.³⁹ However, Carnevale found that drug demand has in fact remained exactly the same. The three criteria—lessened drug production and transportation, violence reduction in Mexico and a decreased demand in the United States—have not been met. It is clear that the Obama administration’s strategy has not yet been successful. Granted that the implementation of a policy of this scope takes time and that the intentions of “Beyond Merida” are good, the policy does not account for domestic factors influencing the drug trade and does not focus enough on the underlying economic and historical issues present in Mexico.

Where should American foreign drug policy go from here? It is difficult to decide if the Merida Initiative has been successful, considering that it was never fully implemented before the final disbursement of plan funds. Should the United States abandon the Merida Initiative completely? Has the Merida Initiative really provided enough resources to combat the enormity of the drug trafficking trade in Latin America? Should it be coupled with the more progressive reforms outlined by the Obama administration? Should more aggressive changes in domestic drug policy to lower demand be implemented? Is the Merida Initiative’s focus on drug trafficking control too narrow for success? Perhaps the answer, in part, lies closer to home.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, among others in the Obama administration, has stressed the United States’ “shared responsibility” in the drug problem facing Mexico. The United States is the biggest customer of the cartels that are being fought against, and it is the largest supplier of assault weapons to the same Mexican drug cartels. Essentially, the drug cartels are fighting the Mexican government with weapons purchased from

the United States. The governments of Mexico and the United States are battling a highly lucrative industry responsible for employing thousands of people and using grizzly scare tactics to intimidate millions of others.

Unfortunately, current policies do not appear to be effective. A third policy option that the Obama administration should consider is using the “Beyond Merida” approach as a point of departure. A real commitment to drug trafficking eradication must be made through recognition of the United States’ role in drug demand and its effects on supply and drug-related violence. Military assistance to Mexico in a sustained effort is necessary to eradicate cartel influence, but as historical outcomes suggest, a broader policy focus is imperative for success. Programs implemented in Mexico should focus on both local and national sustainability, and funding should be consistent for the duration. Plan Colombia was successful in some ways because of the sheer quantity of funding by the US government. Mexico needs funding so that its programs may be consistent, if nothing else. Consistent funding for institution building, military assistance, and progressive programming to divert drug producers to other trades would all serve to limit the supply of drugs flowing into the United States.

A paradigm shift will be necessary to lessen violence in Mexico. The Obama administration’s approach of collaboration and shared responsibility is a welcome departure from that of past administrations, but insufficient attention is given by it to the problem of US demand for drugs. The United States has five percent of the world’s population, yet it has seventeen percent of the world’s drug addicts. US drug policy should reflect these numbers. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reported that the closure of methamphetamine labs in the United States has led to significant increases of methamphetamine production in Mexico. Rather than a decline in the quantity of methamphetamines, production has simply moved to a new location.⁴⁰ Counterdrug programs must focus on and fund drug addiction eradication programs and anti-drug education with the zeal demonstrated by counternarcotics military operations in order to effectively reduce drug demand and drug violence. This approach would meet the criteria of lessening demand and reducing supply in the long run; by attacking drug demand, drug supply would be significantly

affected over time.

In 2009, the Calderon administration confiscated approximately 34,000 weapons, most of which originated in the United States.⁴¹ These were not handguns, but assault weapons such as AK-47s. This suggests that the availability of assault weapons in the United States is a major factor in drug violence. The Obama administration should address the 2004 Assault Weapons Ban reversal and take steps through legislation to reinstate the ban. If reversing the ban is not possible, increased oversight and strengthened enforcement of current laws is necessary; this would mean regulating gun show sales and increasing border security and crackdowns on illegal arms traders in the United States. Violence in Mexico would most certainly be reduced if access to assault and automatic weapons was decreased. Almost daily, the *Los Angeles Times* features stories of mass shootings in cartel-run border cities. Without easy access to automatic weapons, gun violence would decrease.

Lastly, many economists and knowledgeable leaders suggest that legalizing certain drugs would be a means of driving their prices down. Without the high price tags attached to illicit drugs, the high-stakes drug wars would most certainly diminish. Simple economic theory explains that high prices stimulate highly competitive markets, but low prices are less attractive and lessen suppliers. Drug legalization is hotly contested and conflicting information suggests that legalizing drugs, such as marijuana, will produce few changes in Mexico's illicit drug trade and related violence.⁴² Klimer suggests that marijuana sales make up only part of drug trafficking profits with estimates of between \$1.5 and \$2 billion in annual gross revenue.⁴³ However, while Klimer also maintains that it is unknown whether reductions in Mexican DTOs' revenues from exporting marijuana would lead to corresponding decreases in violence, other analysts have suggested that large reductions in revenues could increase violence in the short run but decrease it in the long run.⁴⁴ Therefore, the legalization of certain drugs and the establishment of government price controls could diminish the surges of violence in Mexico and would satisfy, in part, all three of the criteria established.

CONCLUSION

The Merida Initiative has had some positive impacts: it opened dialogue between the United States and Mexico and improved relations that had been cooling for years. President Calderon was the first foreign president to visit the United States after President Obama took office, marking a turning point in diplomatic relations between the countries, and suggesting that closer collaboration would continue.

The drug-trafficking problem in Mexico is enormous. It would be impossible to eradicate a problem of this magnitude quickly. Massive surges of violence unquelled by government intervention have accompanied the increasing lawlessness associated with drug trafficking. This has been evident in the apparent failures of both Mexican and American drug policies for Mexico. This paper has outlined the complexity of foreign drug policy for the United States and the enormity of the problem for Mexico. After assessing the three policies using the established criteria, the third policy emerges as the best course of action for Mexico: the United States should proceed with the “Beyond Merida” approach, while focusing on domestic US factors that influence the drug trade.

“Beyond Merida” should be used as a framework for a more progressive policy that will incorporate a sustained, long term commitment to aid Mexico in its anti-drug efforts. To truly eradicate the rampant supply of drugs and the ever-growing drug trafficking trade, the United States and Mexico must cooperate and the United States must commit to implementing aid programs properly. As GAO reports have shown, accountability has proven difficult for the State Department. To truly affect the both supply and demand sides of the drug problem, policies must be implemented properly, with measures in place to ensure success and cohesion. US-led programs should focus on local and national sustainability to ensure lasting impacts.

A military-centered aid approach is not working. Plan Colombia showed that the United States could eradicate cartel influence in one country, but that the drug trade would merely shift to a new country. Historically, Mexican presidents have fought organized crime and drug trafficking through “combating fire with more fire” with little success.⁴⁵

Clearly, a new approach is necessary. Mexico's Supreme Agricultural Court estimates that approximately thirty percent of Mexico's cultivatable land is used for drug production.⁴⁶ To truly eradicate the drug supply problem, not only must drug demand be curbed, but a commitment from the United States and Mexico is necessary to retrain those involved in the drug industry to produce different goods, and social reforms are necessary to support the impoverished.

Thomas Cole argues that the killings in Mexico and movements in the US market for drugs are correlated.⁴⁷ Drug policy analyst Mark Kleiman agrees that Mexico's position as the primary transit point for illegal drugs entering the United States is directly linked to US demand. If demand rises, drug violence will rise as well. Kleiman notes that the heaviest drug users are responsible for the largest portion of demand and says that, "taking away the drug dealers' best customers will reduce their earnings."⁴⁸ Effective intervention targeted at these drug users is necessary to affect the illegal drug economy. The prevention of future substance abuse could also help shrink the illicit drug market, thereby reducing the stakes for DTO profits that motivates violence.⁴⁹ Another option to consider is the legalization of certain drugs, something that has been advocated for by the United Nation's Committee for Crime and Drugs and many political leaders.

Much of Mexico's violence is due to the use of automatic weapons, most of which come from the United States. Heavily armed cartels wage wars against one another with catastrophic results, not only killing each other, but more often than not murdering innocent bystanders. To eradicate illegal weapons transfers, Villiers Negroonte asserts that a two-pronged assault is necessary.⁵⁰ Not only is it necessary to curtail "downstream" sales to criminal organizations, but to successfully reduce weapons trafficking and availability of arms to Mexican criminal organizations, "upstream" sales in the United States must be further regulated through the implementation of stricter rules dealing with gun shows, gun dealers and illicit private sales. Villiers Negroonte calls for an effective assault weapons ban, which will, "first seek to ban the import of lethal weapons, including assault weapons, and second to end the grandfathering of weapons in excess

of .50 caliber.”⁵¹ The United States must recognize that its gun policies and lackluster enforcement directly relate to the increased violence and instability in Mexico and must strive to curb this alarming trend. The first step that Obama administration should take is addressing the 2004 Assault Weapons Ban reversal. The administration should work to reinstate the ban and heighten oversight and regulation of gun shows and illegal traders.

President Calderon has shown an admirable dedication to eliminating drug cartels and corruption in Mexico. The United States and Mexico have a unique relationship stemming from a shared history and similar ideological and political views. Both countries are democracies and were founded on similar principles. If Calderon continues his undertaking, and the United States continues to support him while focusing more on domestic drug and weapons policy and enforcement, it will be possible to diminish the cartel stranglehold on Mexico and lessen its widespread violence.

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