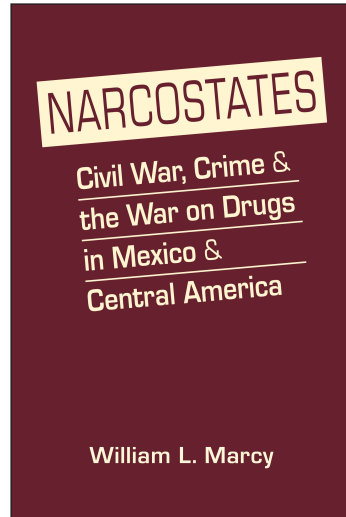


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Narcostates:
Civil War, Crime, and
the War on Drugs
in Mexico and
Central America

William L. Marcy

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314
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telephone 303.444.6684
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1

The Opening of a Narcotrafficking Corridor

In October 1997, members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang stopped the Chiapas-Mayab train at Mexico's Tapachula railroad station near the Chiapas-Guatemala border. As immigrants clamoring to get to the United States attempted to board the northbound train, a member of the gang walked to the platform and told the immigrants, "We have a pact with the devil and we have to shoot three people. Three days ago, we shot one and they did not die. We have to draw blood, and one of you has to die today."¹

This act symbolized the nearly endless continuation of armed conflict in Central America after decades of civil war. However, the violence was not isolated to Central America. To the north, Mexico had become a major narcotics-producing and transit country, with powerful cartels that possessed the ability to challenge the authority of the government. Earlier, between 1970 and 1980, narcotraffickers had corrupted Mexico from within, nearly causing a total breakdown of society and government control.

This book examines the relationship between Mexico and Central America and how narcotrafficking and counternarcotics in both of these regions and the United States have contributed to the current miasma. The rise of the Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), how they supplanted the Colombians in the drug trade, and the crucial role that Central America played in facilitating the Mexican takeover are all topics covered in this study. Within that framework, there are numerous operational components presented here. Central America and its civil war era were pivotal to the shift in narcopower from the Colombians to the Mexicans. US and Mexican counternarcotics policies escalated the drug war conflict in Mexico, causing the Mexican DTOs to move deeper into Central America, which had only begun to recover from its civil wars. It was there that the Mexicans expanded their criminal activities in association with the regional

gang networks that had become involved in the drug trade during the post-civil war era. Finally, to gain control of the situation, the United States launched policy initiatives in Mexico and Central America—known as the Mérida Initiative and the Central American Regional Security Initiative—which were criticized for militarizing the conflict. The results of these policies are in the process of being assessed.

Mexican Cartel Evolution

By the mid-1990s, the Mexican cartels had wrested control of the drug trade from the Colombians and were fighting among themselves and against the government to dominate it. Emerging from decades of civil war, Central America found itself drawn into the US and Mexican governments' war on drugs as Mexico became the regional pivot for narcotics moving northward. By the mid-2000s, after the Mexican government adopted a more militaristic counternarcotics policy, the cartels vigorously resisted the country's efforts to rein them in. Simultaneously, the Mexican cartels modified their operations by deepening their presence in Central America with the help of gangs and contraband networks. Still recovering from the civil war era, Central America did not have the resources to control the flow of narcotics or the increasing lawlessness within its own borders. By 2010, pervasive Mexican narcotrafficking networks operated throughout all Central American countries, forcing governments there to conduct their own costly and deadly war against narcotraffickers.

Three generations of Mexican cartels have evolved from small networks into heavily armed, pseudomilitary organizations that rivaled each other for control over narcotics moving from the Andean region through Central America into Mexico. The first generation existed during the 1970s and consisted of competing contraband smugglers, such as Alberto Sicilia Falcón, Pedro Avilés Pérez, and Pablo Acosta Villarreal. They taught their trade to the second-generation cartel leaders, especially Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, Rafael Caro Quintero, and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, the fathers of the Guadalajara cartel. After the arrest of Félix Gallardo in 1989, the cartel was divided among his lieutenants—the Arellano Félix brothers, Joaquín Guzmán Loera (“El Chapo”), and Amado Carrillo Fuentes—who would go on to form the rival Tijuana, Sinaloa, and Juárez cartels, respectively.

Initially, the first- and second-generation Mexican cartels had no desire to take on the Mexican government's police and military. Instead, they sought to corrupt politicians and officials in the military and police to control them from within. Throughout the 1990s, the second-generation cartels incrementally stepped up their resistance to the Mexican state while they warred among each other for territorial control with increasing savagery. By 2010, external and internal pressures created fractures within the Gulf,

Sinaloa, Tijuana, and Juárez cartels that led to the formation of Mexico's third-generation cartels, such as Los Zetas, La Familia Michoacana, and the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG).

By 2014, many of the second-generation cartel leaders were either dead or imprisoned. The third-generation capos reorganized the old cartels or formed new splinter cartels that turned on their parent organizations while carving out territory of their own using unprecedented levels of violence and sadism.

As the cartels evolved, Mexico experienced three waves of criminal violence and lawlessness due to the Mexican government's aggressive stance against narcotrafficking and power struggles among the cartels. The first wave occurred between the 1985 death of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Kiki Camarena, the 1993 arrest of Gulf cartel kingpin Juan García Ábrego, and the 1994 corruption scandal surrounding the assassination of political leader José Ruiz Massieu. The second wave followed Gallardo's decision to divide territorial control among his lieutenants. After his arrest in 1989, Gallardo tried to run the cartel from jail, but by the mid-1990s he was no longer in control. His lieutenants went to war for control over the Guadalajara cartel's trafficking networks. The first prison escape by El Chapo Guzmán in 2001 intensified the bloody contest for control over Mexico's narcotrafficking corridors or *plazas* until 2007. A shift in cartel alliances and the implementation of President Felipe Calderón's Mérida Initiative in 2008 triggered the third wave, prompting ferocious confrontations with Mexico's military and security forces despite the cartels' ceaseless efforts to corrupt them. Mexican government pressure, combined with the ongoing cartel war, spawned a convulsive shift in cartel allegiances and an unprecedented wave of violence. The third wave lasted roughly until 2014 when El Chapo was arrested a second time. The cartel war subsided following his arrest. However, the arrest did not mean that the Mexican cartels' territorial disputes were permanently settled. Mexico's third-generation upstarts wanted the *plazas* of distribution entirely for themselves. Low-intensity conflicts would continue.

From Political Violence to Criminal Violence

In the second half of the twentieth century, the people of Mexico and Central America experienced a marked shift from political to criminal violence. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) dominated Mexico, which existed as a single-party authoritarian state. Following the Tlatelolco Massacre in October 1968, Mexican guerrilla movements challenged the PRI's legitimacy. The guerrillas aligned themselves with Mexico's rural peasantry (*campesinos*). As the guerrillas and *campesinos* forged alliances, the US government pressured Mexico to control its border

and narcotics production. Mexico's acceptance of US counternarcotics policies exacerbated political opposition to the Mexican government, as Mexico's security services conducted counternarcotics operations in the remote countryside while simultaneously waging a "dirty war" against leftist guerrillas who sympathized with the campesinos that lived and produced narcotics in those remote regions. Although the guerrilla insurgencies subsided in the late 1970s, Mexico's drug war did not. The Mexican effort evolved into the Permanent Campaign against narcotrafficking—a campaign the government undertook reluctantly.

While these events unfolded in Mexico, Central America convulsed with civil war as revolutionary insurgencies developed in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and, to a lesser extent, Honduras. The near feudal relations in the countryside and the lack of political and agrarian reform led to extreme poverty, unemployment, and social dislocation during the 1970s and 1980s. As the Cold War heightened regional tensions, the United States and USSR both vied for regional influence by providing military assistance to revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces. By the end of the 1980s, guns, drugs, and revolution had become synonymous. Within the chaos, the foundation was laid for turning Mexico and Central America into a hotbed for narcotrafficking. The proceeds from drug smuggling fueled the conflict and, in turn, further expanded Central American narcotrafficking.² Within the chaos, narcotrafficking not only survived, it thrived.

In Nicaragua, allegations of drug smuggling were levied against all participants in the conflict. This included the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE) and the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), which worked in conjunction with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Sandinista and Cuban involvement was also alleged by the US State Department. Greater evidence was levied against Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, who played both sides of the Central American conflict, ultimately leading to the US invasion of Panama in 1989. Significantly, all of these actors were alleged to have developed narcotrafficking ties with Colombia's Medellín cartel and the Guadalajara organization in Mexico.³

In the aftermath of civil war, narcotrafficking and production remained omnipresent. The cultivation of marijuana and opium continued in both Mexico and Guatemala. With civil war winding down, narcotrafficking through Central America expanded during the early 1990s. By this point, the Mexican cartels' affiliation with the Colombian cartels was well-established. After the defeat of the Medellín and Cali cartels and the closing of the Caribbean corridor, Andean drug traffickers shifted their operations to the Pacific corridor and Central America.⁴

Despite the need to confront this problem, Central American nations were in the process of military demobilization. The question before them was how to implement counternarcotics enforcement programs without

making the programs appear as military repression in the form of new counterinsurgency operations.

By the mid-1990s, the Mexicans replaced the Colombian DTOs as Latin America's dominant narcotics traffickers. With the expansion of their power, they extended their influence throughout the Central American isthmus. While the Mexican cartels expanded their reach into Central America, the Colombian cartels decentralized their operations. The Colombians handed over the responsibility for the transportation and sale of narcotics in the United States to the Mexican cartels. As the transfer occurred, the Mexican cartels were under increasing pressure at home for a series of high-profile assassinations, such as the murder of Cardinal Posadas Ocampo in 1993 and the assassination of PRI presidential candidate Colosio Murrieta in 1994. To avoid further detection, the Mexican cartels took advantage of Central America's post-civil war power vacuum to extend their reach throughout the region.

To deal with the cartels, the Mexican government militarized the war on drugs, stirring up a hornets' nest in both Mexico and Central America. Pressured by the United States, in 2004 President Vicente Fox incorporated the Mexican military into the government's counternarcotics strategy, which altered Mexican society. What was once business as usual, with minimal but sometimes high-profile casualties, turned into a low-intensity conflict. Mexico and Central America watched their homicide rates rise exponentially. Barely a decade since their civil wars had ended, Central American violence swelled once again. As the narcotrafficking industry shifted in response, Central American governments did not have enough time to develop effective counternarcotics programs. The demobilization of Central American military and guerrilla forces converted many who participated in the civil wars into hired hands for the Mexican DTOs.⁵ The deportation of former refugees from the United States back to Central America during the mid-1990s added fuel to the fire. Among the deportees were members of Central American street gangs, such as MS-13 and Calle 18 (18th Street) with criminal records. While imprisoned in the United States, these gang members had become subordinates of the Mafia Mexicana (La eMe), which was tied to the Mexican cartels. Upon their return to Central America, the gang members organized and created a network that ran from Central America to the United States. As that network expanded, the gangs became auxiliaries of the Mexican cartels who now controlled the narcocorridor from South America to Mexico.⁶

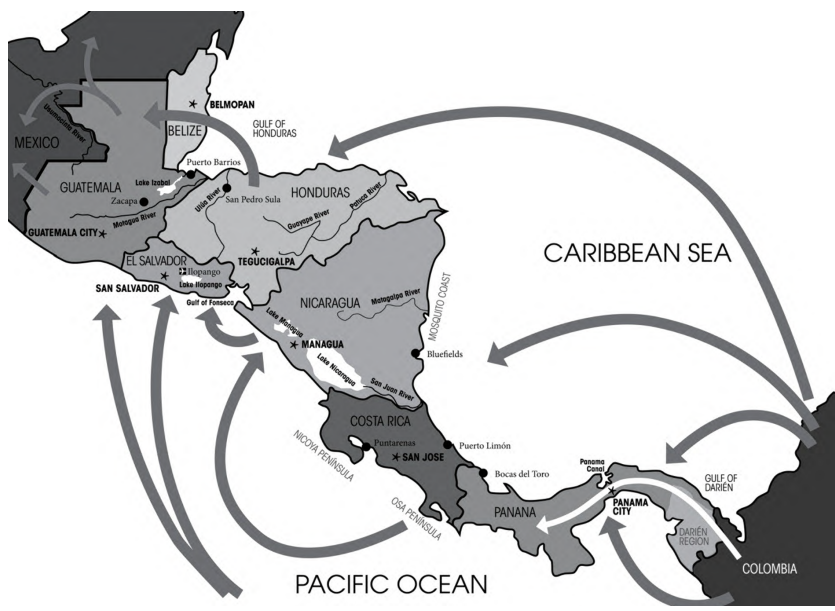
Central America never recovered from its civil wars. High unemployment among its youth, accompanied by military demobilization and the Mexican drug war, led to a confluence of former revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries, gangs, and Central American crime syndicates operating in coordination with the various Mexican cartels. By 2008, two-thirds of all cocaine entering

the United States passed through Central America into Mexico, with Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala being designated by the United States as major transitory countries for narcotics (see Figure 1.1).⁷

Because of a lack of resources and political will, as well as corruption within Mexican and Central American security forces, crime networks took advantage of Mexico's permeable border and Central America's weak political institutions to smuggle narcotics, precursor chemicals, and impoverished migrants into Mexico and the United States. The Mexican and Central American governments were simply incapable of controlling this multibillion-dollar industry headed by criminal organizations that maintained sophisticated technological and military capabilities. As the traffickers fought among themselves and against government forces, a new security crisis erupted in Mexico and Central America bringing unprecedented levels of brutality and violence that resembled the revolutionary political violence of previous generations.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, headlines in Mexico and Central America reported drug-related crimes that often reached barbaric proportions:

Figure 1.1 Major Trafficking Routes Through Central America to Mexico



On February 27, 2000, Tijuana police chief Alfredo de la Torre was murdered on a Tijuana highway. The attackers peppered his vehicle with 102 bullets from automatic weapons. De la Torre was murdered on the same highway where Tijuana police chief Federico Benítez López was ambushed and assassinated in April 1994.⁸

In February 2002, thirty Honduran antinarcotics officers raided a safehouse near El Salvador's border. A shootout erupted between the police and the Villanueva gang. After the raid, an arsenal of grenades, antitank guns, and AK-47s were found in the house. The gang was considered responsible for 210 kidnappings, several bank robberies, and the movement of Colombian cocaine through Central America's Caribbean ports. Evidence confiscated in the raid linked the gang to the Arellano Félix cartel.⁹

In September 2006, Father Ricardo Antonio Romero, a Catholic priest and a critic of the culture of violence and drugs that rampaged throughout El Salvador, was beaten to death. Romero was organizing a protest against the wave of violence in Sonsonate, El Salvador, where the homicide rate stood at 77 murders per 100,000 residents.¹⁰

In December 2008 within Tegucigalpa, two *asesinos de moto* (motorcycle killers) opened fire on the vehicle carrying General Julián González, the Honduran director of the Office for Combating Drug Trafficking. Five days prior to his assassination, González had accused Hugo Chávez and the Colombian guerrillas, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), of trafficking in cocaine. He also alleged that Manuel Zelaya, the president of Honduras, was under investigation for moving cocaine through Honduras.¹¹

On January 8, 2010, the body of Hugo Hernández, a thirty-six-year-old man affiliated with the Ciudad Juárez cartel, was dumped on the streets of Los Mochis, a town located in the state of Sinaloa. His body was cut into seven pieces. Hernández's face was peeled off, stitched onto a soccer ball, and left in a bag near the city hall. A note from the Sinaloa cartel accompanied the ball. It read, "Happy New Year, because this will be your last."¹²

On May 15, 2011, thirty to forty Los Zetas killed twenty-seven peasants by decapitation on a farm in the northern Petén region of Guatemala as an act of retribution for the theft of 2,000 kilos of cocaine. The owner of the farm reportedly stole the cocaine from Los Zetas.¹³

These and similar stories were almost endless. By the end of the decade, reports of victims found dismembered or with their hearts cut out or hung from bridges with *narcomantas* (banners) displayed around their bodies became daily occurrences. Necklacing—placing a tire full of gasoline around a person's neck and setting it on fire—or the *el guiso* (the stew)—dousing victims with gasoline and burning them alive in oil barrels—were just a few of the many ways the DTOs disposed of their enemies. Kidnapping, extortion,

and murder for hire to grease the wheels of narcotics and arms trafficking became the norm.

The US War on Drugs

The bloodletting shocked the world. The United States wanted its border controlled, but to do so meant that the Mexican and Central American governments had to pick a fight with forces they were reluctant to engage. The US solution to the drug problem remained the same as the one they employed in the Andean region—the militarization of the war on drugs, which came in the form of the 2008 Mérida Initiative. Initially applied to both Mexico and Central America, with the majority of funding going to Mexico, the Mérida Initiative increased the Mexican military’s role against narcotrafficking. Mexico was required to confront heavily armed criminal organizations that operated not only on the outside but within the state itself. In Central America, the fragile post-civil war peace was placed under enormous strain. To confront the DTO-gang network, the Northern Triangle countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—had to implement *mano dura* (heavy-handed) policies that resembled the counterinsurgency strategies they had employed during the 1980s. Ultimately, Central American nations realized that a regional solution was necessary to deal with the drug war problem, much like the regional framework that had been necessary to end Central America’s civil conflicts.¹⁴ With US financial assistance, the 2010 Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) was the outgrowth of Central American cooperation to confront narcotrafficking. These governments criticized the conditions for US aid because it relied too much on a military solution like the Mérida Initiative in Mexico. Nonetheless, by 2014, many of the major drug capos were arrested or killed and the violence diminished slightly. The bigger problem was that Mexican traffickers were now firmly established in Central America; the reduction of narcoviolence would only be temporary.

The Ongoing Cartel War, 2014–Present

The victor at the end of Mexico’s third wave of criminal violence was Ismael Zambada García (“El Mayo”), a Sinaloa cartel leader who kept a low profile and had assisted the Mexican and US governments to confront the more violent cartels that were also, conveniently, his enemies. El Mayo’s maneuvering bought a temporary truce in Mexico as he became boss. However, other third-generation cartels, such as Los Zetas and the CJNG, remained in the wings. Despite a temporary reduction in drug-related violence in Mexico, Mexican cartel rivalries triggered a crime wave

in Central America. Thousands of people were driven from their homes and migrated toward the United States, leading the US government to declare that its border was overwhelmed by Central American refugees, especially from 2015 to 2022.

The situation remained complex, with multiple concurrent themes: (1) the evolution of the Mexican DTOs and their methods of transporting narcotics through the Central American and Mexican narcocorridor; (2) the ongoing difficulties faced by Mexican and Central American authorities in their attempts to halt the proliferation of narcotrafficking; and (3) the destabilizing impact of feckless US policies.

About the Book

Fully understanding the dynamics of the war on drugs in Central America is impossible without considering the conditions in Mexico and vice versa. Rather than looking at Mexico and Central America as separate stories, the book examines the region as a whole. Covering the period from 1972 to 2020, the questions that will be asked include the following: How did the region devolve into the lawless narcotrafficking corridor and distribution hub that exists today? What effect did Central America's civil wars have on the proliferation of narcotrafficking through the Central American isthmus and Mexico? Why did the war on drugs in Mexico become so murderous? How and why did the drug war in Mexico spill over into Central America after its civil wars ended? What were the methods and major events that Mexican narcotraffickers and their Central American affiliates used to challenge the legitimacy of state power in Mexico and Central America? To what extent was the narco industry institutionalized in both Mexico and Central America? Why did Central American police and military reorganizations in the post-civil war period and the implementation of the Mérida Initiative and CARSI fail to rein in the cartels? Finally, did US policy "Colombianize" the drug wars in Mexico and Central America?¹⁵

This book is based extensively on primary sources, including US embassy reports to the State Department, Agency for International Development (USAID) analyses, DEA administrative reports, CIA country studies, presidential papers, UN and World Bank economic studies, Organization of American States (OAS) studies, congressional reports, Government Accountability Office¹⁶ (GAO) reports, newspapers, and personal interviews. Important documents were also found in the National Archives and the National Security Archives at George Washington University. Much of the core material in this book was made available through a declassification process with the US State Department and the Department of Justice.

The documents employed in this book give a unique perspective of how US government policies toward narcotrafficking developed. It is important to note that these sources hold their own inherent biases and are limited because of national security interests surrounding the war on drugs. In general, US government sources provide accounts that favor the US administrations that have been in charge. As a consequence, the reliability of these documents varies. To correct this imbalance, I have attempted to provide documents and secondary sources that offer a range of perspectives. Other primary materials, such as newspapers, contain their own biases—they only provide accounts of events as seen through the eyes of a reporter and the biases of the editorial staff.

While efforts have been made to present primary and secondary sources from multiple perspectives, the nature of and secrecy surrounding narcotrafficking make it impossible to ever present a complete documentation of the drug war. Any information regarding the narcotics industry, including the production and transportation of narcotics, is just an estimate. There is no way to know how much money was generated, nor is there any way to know for certain the motivations of all actors involved. On all sides of the war on drugs, secrecy, disinformation, corruption, and murder have been omnipresent.

Examining the history of how the social dynamics of revolution in Central America and Mexico transformed into the struggle between the DTOs and regional governments merits attention because the subject is relatively new and few have approached both subjects from this perspective. This book is an attempt to investigate the comprehensive mix of ideas about revolution, narcotics trafficking, the rise of the cartels, and governmental counternarcotics policies in relation to the war on drugs, militarization, and security.

Chapter 2 examines the Nixon administration's implementation of Operation Intercept and how it evolved into the Mexican government's permanent campaign against narcotics. The permanent campaign became part of Mexico's "dirty war" against subversives and brought institutional corruption, which negatively affected Mexico's security services and relations with the United States.¹⁷ By the end of the 1970s, the permanent campaign had solved nothing. Mexico evolved into a major transit hub for moving narcotics northward.

Chapter 3 provides a broad overview of Central America's conflicts and the development of narcotrafficking during the civil war era, including the role of the Contras and Sandinistas, as well as the regime of Manuel Noriega in Panama. Investigations of drug trafficking during the civil war era have looked at either the role of CIA-Contra-Panamanian drug trafficking or Nicaraguan-Cuban drug trafficking. The goal of this chapter is not to revise or revisit that debate, but rather to provide context in which the drug war can be viewed as an extension of Central America's civil wars.

Chapter 4 focuses on Mexico and the evolution of Mexico's first- and second-generation cartels during the 1980s and 1990s. It outlines the rivalries and alliances and explains how divisions among the cartels turned into a full-blown cartel war. By covering the second-generation cartels, the chapter will also show how these DTOs became dominant forces within Mexico through their ability to corrupt the country's political, judicial, and domestic security institutions.

Chapter 5 reviews Mexico's growing political instability in the early 1990s as a result of the cartel wars. An important development at this time was the implementation of NAFTA and Mexico's subsequent economic collapse in 1994, which gave impetus to the narcotrafficking economy at the same moment the Mexican government was forced to face down the cartels. The chapter then focuses on the effect of the drug war on the Zapatista rebellion and the assassinations of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta and the PRI's general secretary, José Ruiz Massieu, during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994).

Chapter 6 examines a neglected area of the drug war, namely the growing relationship between Mexican and Colombian DTOs. It first investigates the establishment of Colombian narcotics distribution networks in Mexico, then describes how the Mexican cartels seized control of the drug trade following the collapse of the Medellín and Cali cartels. The chapter also depicts how traffickers embedded themselves throughout Central America at a time when the region was thought to be relatively free from narcotrafficking.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the dilemma of creating effective counternarcotics forces in post-civil war Central America and the proliferation of criminal gangs there. A regional counternarcotics program was outlined by the Central American governments, but the financial and political will to implement a coordinated program did not emerge.

Chapter 8 returns to Mexico and the emergence of the cartel wars from 2000 to 2014. In 2000, four major cartels were fighting over territory; by the end of the decade, they would all splinter. Ultimately, the third-generation cartels defied and then rivaled their parent cartels for control over Mexico's plazas of distribution.

Chapter 9 looks at the Mexican government's response to the burgeoning power of the cartels. The chapter makes the case that the increasing participation of the Mexican military and implementation of the Mérida Initiative against the cartels exacerbated the cartel wars. The militarization of Mexico's drug war also had the effect of increasing corruption within the armed forces and driving the cartels deeper into Central America.

Chapter 10 returns to Central America and the regional security threat presented by narcotrafficking in the new millennium. The chapter covers

the deepening crisis presented by the confluence of gangs and Mexican DTOs and how this led to the implementation of CARSI.

Chapter 11 discusses the evolution of the drug war in Mexico and Central America from 2014 to the present and how it became an inseparable conflict that permeated both Mexico and Central America.

Chapter 12 concludes the book with an analysis of what has been discussed and draws comparisons between Mexico and Colombia while considering whether it will ever be possible to close the narcocorridor.

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Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Hearing on Violence in Central America*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., June 26, 2007, 8.

14. Colleen McGuiness and Patricia M. Russotto, *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Reagan Imprint* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1986), 74. The peace plans were called Esquipulas I and II. See Chapter 2.

15. “Colombianization” is best defined as using narcotics profits and terroristic violence to subvert the institutions of a specific country from within while government counternarcotics programs become militarized and increasingly violent in their implementation.

16. In 2004, GAO’s legal name changed from the General Accounting Office to the Government Accountability Office, per GAO.gov.

17. Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism, and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 31.