

Mexico—The Essentials



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NIXON AND ECHEVERRÍA EFFORTS

Nixon's campaign against drugs coincided with the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970–1976). Expanded antidrug efforts highlighted the obstacles to enforcement represented by the Mexican police. Echeverría had served as secretary of Gobernación (Interior Security) in the previous administration, and he was believed to be complicit in ordering the 1968 Tlateloco massacre. The suggestion that he was involved in other illegal government actions seemed confirmed by his association with his childhood friend, Arturo “El Negro” Durazo Moreno.

Durazo had a career in law enforcement that he used to create opportunities for smuggling, extortion, and other criminal activities. During the administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970), he served as the commander of the airport police, where he facilitated illegal imports and exports and made a fortune that he flaunted. Despite negative reaction, President Echeverría approved his appointment as Mexico City's chief of the Judicial Police. Durazo's public show of corrupt wealth including building a mansion in Mexico City with a replica of Studio 57, collecting exotic, expensive cars, owning lavish vacation homes, and stashing money in foreign bank accounts on a salary of a few hundred dollars a month. He soon was under indictment in Miami, Florida, for cocaine smuggling. Six years later, the next president, José López Portillo (1976–1982), another boyhood friend, ignored his previous activities, and appointed him the chief of all Federal District police. At the end of López Portillo's term, outraged demands for Durazo's arrest forced him to flee the country, and subsequently he was arrested in Puerto Rico in 1984. Knowledge of his illegal activities implied immunity from government action and hinted that he shared his corrupt monies with presidents and other important politicians over the decades. Allegations of presidential connivance seemed confirmed because the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), limited by the president's directions in Mexico, did little to limit his activities.

US government officials recognized the system, as did individuals on the border involved with the long history of smuggling in both directions. The drug industry and government efforts to extinguish it brought staggering amounts of money into the equation that included drug traffickers, corrupt political and police officials, the DEA, the US State Department, and congressional and local politicians.

Durazo and others like him notwithstanding, Nixon suggested the use of herbicides, a tactic borrowed from the Vietnam War, to eradicate illegal crops. Officials in Mexico City rejected the plan. Moreover, they stressed that Mexicans had strong family values, in a not-so-subtle critique of the United States, making them less vulnerable to the lure of drugs. Their refusal to follow the US lead on drug suppression resulted from a sense of national sovereignty and a conviction that illegal drugs were a US consumer problem.

Operation Intercept was Nixon's furious reaction to force cooperation. In effect closing the border (see Fig. 8.2), he ordered painstaking searches of every car and truck crossing into the United States from Mexico. After two weeks of this policy, Mexican officials unveiled Operation Cooperation to restore economic activities along the border. It also authorized US agents to monitor drug crops in Mexico that Mexican soldiers then destroyed. In somewhat of a surprise, the officials shortly afterward also announced Operation Condor. General José Hernández Toledo had orders to use 10,000 troops to eliminate opium poppies by using pesticides or other chemicals in the Golden Triangle, and US flyovers were authorized to observe the destruction of drug plants. Both programs pushed opium and marijuana cultivators to more remote locations.

As a consequence of Operation Condor, the drug cartels in Sinaloa moved to Guadalajara, with the help of Governor Flavio Romero de Velasco (1977–1983), who assisted with housing where he thought he could monitor them. The arrangement required the cartel to pay 25% of profits to him. Questions arose immediately about whether the governor passed a percentage to party or other federal officials, and if so, how high did the money rise.



Figure 8.2 Operation Intercept during Nixon's administration.

The US government remained active. Nixon expanded his drug program when he signed the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 that declared war on heroin (called Mexican Mud) to initiate the "Crusade to Save the Children." In an additional step in 1973, the antidrug campaign acquired its own newly created police agency, the DEA, and the following year the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) opened on the border.

The DEA escalated pressure on drug traffickers, who made changes in their operations. The enhanced efforts to control the drug traffic revealed cracks in Mexico's official party. This party had emerged in 1929 as a response to the violence and destructive turmoil of the revolution. Its structure brought individuals into the party to place some limits on their activities and, using what President Obregón had called cannon blasts of pesos, to give them payoffs to retire. Governors formed the core of the system. If they permitted corruption in their administration, they usually took a cut of the profits as protection costs. This arrangement applied to legal, illegal, moral, and immoral enterprises. Politically it worked well.

Prior to the 1980s, government officials dealt with the drug traffickers, who made it clear they would collaborate with politicians, police chiefs, and other bureaucrats. Under this cooperative umbrella, traffickers did not resort to the kidnapping, public intimidation, and excessive violence typical of Colombia. They explicitly avoided marketing of drugs within Mexico, focusing on the well-established US market. On special occasions, such as baptisms, girls' coming of age parties (quinceañeras), and marriages, traffickers mingled socially with political and police officials. Relations among drug gangs reflected an attitude that the market was large enough to share, so they were cooperative, if not cordial.

This political-drug balance ended in the 1980s. The first major US effort in its war on the drug industry succeeded briefly, but ultimately backfired. The DEA's Operation Hat Tricks disrupted the cocaine supply line from South America through the Caribbean to Miami, Florida. Cocaine smugglers quickly turned to Mexican traffickers, who controlled 70% of the US drug market, for distribution assistance. Creating the new routes required reaching profit-sharing agreements between Colombian and Mexican drug gangs. The Mexicans agreed because cocaine did not compete with local poppies processed into heroin. The Colombians soon decided they could still meet the US demand east of the Mississippi River by using alternative Caribbean routes. They left it to their profit-sharing partners, the Mexican traffickers, to move and distribute cocaine west of the Mississippi. As methamphetamines became popular, Mexican labs could supply the demand without the need to import supplies and could use the same distribution networks for a more diverse product line.

Colombian-produced cocaine brought profits of millions of dollars into Mexico that resulted in deadly rivalry among cartels, with violence that reached the civilian population and government authorities, including the police and politicians. The fantastic profits opened careers for those willing to take risks and having the luck to survive: It required little education and no high society

connections. The short life expectancy did not diminish the opportunities for flashy clothes, expensive cars, beautiful women, ostentatious mansions, and luxurious apartments in Mexico City. The profits of drug business were too high to count, so the traffickers relied on weighing stacks of US \$100 bills. The amounts of money increased the violence.

With much more money after 1980 than they ever had before, the traffickers became an increasing domestic challenge. Suddenly, millionaires became multimillionaires able to buy any service they needed. Relationships with other cartels, politicians, and police reflected the amount of money available, with exorbitant payoffs and outrageous corruption that reached into all levels of government. Bribery stretched into the political parties. Both the governing official party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the main opposition party, the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), had officials with drug connections. Drug lords embarrassed public officials who they believed had not shown them the respect they believed their money had bought. The cooperation of the years before 1980 had ended.

THE CAMARENA EPISODE

For US policymakers, the outrage that caused an escalation in the war on drugs occurred in 1985. DEA agent Enrique Camarena exposed a sophisticated marijuana plantation in Chihuahua. In revenge, narco-gangsters grabbed him off the streets of Guadalajara. State and federal police went through the motions of investigating the kidnapping until US officials demanded results. Eventually his body was found. He had been savagely tortured to death. The US conviction that perpetrators were known to politicians and local law enforcement led to legal action that resulted in the extradition of Rubén Zuno Arce, the brother-in-law of former President Echeverría. Bounty hunters hired by the DEA captured the Guadalajaran medical doctor Humberto Álvarez, who kept Camarena alive as long as possible to prolong the torture. Both men were tried and convicted. Zuno Arce died in a federal prison in December 2012 at the age of 82. US Senator Jesse Helms, commenting on the Camarena outrage in 1986, charged the Mexican government with corruption. The death of Camarena marked a hardening of the US attitude toward what officials regarded as Mexico's slipshod efforts to control illegal drugs.

CERTIFICATION

US officials responded by legislating a certification requirement in 1986. For a nation where drug cartels produced or transported illegal drugs, the US president had to certify that officials there were doing everything possible to stop these activities and that they were cooperating with the United States in the war on drugs. Sanctions, including loss of foreign aid, followed decertification. Mexican officials reacted angrily to the legislation, claiming that it constituted political interference in domestic affairs and violated national sovereignty.

Mexico represented a special case because of its economic interdependency with the US policies that diminished tourism, tactics, such as those employed during Operation Intercept, that disrupted commerce, and programs that damaged the economy could increase the flow of illegal migration across the border. Alienating the Mexican regime might result in requests for assistance from the USSR, Cuba, or China. Nevertheless, congressional proponents of US certification policies believed it would pressure the Mexican regime to take strong actions against the drug traffic. The presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), it was later discovered, demonstrated just the opposite as his brother, Raul, had direct ties with the drug cartels.

Along with certification, the US Congress in 1988 authorized creation of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) within the executive branch under the president as commander-in-chief. The ONDCP issued the National Drug Control Strategy to provide information about drug trends, to assess other antinarcotic programs, and to compile information for agency directors to use in making decisions.