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CIDE

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**DRUG TRAFFICKING IN US-MEXICAN RELATIONS:
THE POLITICS OF SIMULATION**

Abstract

This document presents the hypothesis that the Mexican and U.S. governments are trapped in their current anti-drug strategy. This strategy causes high levels of violence and corruption in Mexican territory, and cannot be changed because it responds to pressures exerted by American public opinion on its own government. One of the consequences is that the U.S. government is compelled annually to certify the Mexican government's fight against drugs. This certification constrains an accurate evaluation of Mexico's combat against narcotrafficking, because it tends to underestimate failures and exaggerate accomplishments. Nevertheless, the possibility of change in the anti-drug strategy is limited, so this scenario is expected to endure for several years. In this sense one can also expect a better integration of Mexican and U.S. anti-drug policies in the near and medium term.

In this document is presented the hypothesis that the Mexican and U.S. Governments are trapped in the current antidrug strategy, which causes high levels of violence and corruption in Mexican territory, and that the remarked strategy can not be changed bacuse it responds to pressures excercised by american public opinion upon its own government. One consequence of this hypothesis is that U.S. government is compelled to annually certify the mexican government in its fight against drugs. This impides to accurately evaluate combat against narcotrafficking in Mexico because it tends to underestimate failures and to exaggerate accomplishments. Nevertheless, perspectives of change in the antidrug strategy are limited, which causes to expect that this scenario will be maintained for several years. In this sense it is also likely to expect for a better integration of Mexican antidrug policy and U.S. antidrug policy.

Resumen

En este documento se presenta la hipótesis de que el gobierno de México y el de Estados Unidos están atrapados en la actual estrategia anti-drogas. la cual provoca altos niveles de violencia y corrupción en territorio mexicano, y que dicha estrategia no puede ser cambiada pues responde a las presiones que ejerce la opinión pública estadounidense sobre su propio gobierno. Una consecuencia de esto es que el gobierno de Estados Unidos se ve obligado a certificar cada año al gobierno mexicano en su lucha contra las drogas. Ello impide evaluar adecuadamente el combate contra el narcotráfico en México pues tiende a subestimar las fallas y a exagerar los éxitos. Sin embargo, las perspectivas de cambio de la estrategia antidrogas son limitadas, lo cual hace esperar que este escenario se mantenga durante varios años más. En este sentido, es también factible esperar una mayor integración de la política antidrogas de México con la política antidrogas de Estados Unidos.

Introduction

Without any doubt, drug trafficking is one of the most important phenomenon of our time. It affects the economic, political and social life of hundreds of millions of people all over the world. It also affects the political institutions of many countries in a way that is difficult to generalize, but which, in several cases, challenges the existence of the state itself. The level of corruption and violence that drug trafficking generates in some countries, particularly Latin American ones, is certainly one of the most serious threats these states face. For many of these nations, the definition of drug trafficking as a national security threat is not an exaggeration.

The corruption associated with the drug trade touches everything: government officers, the Army, the Church, etc. In the case of Mexico, the ability to weaken state institutions has no parallel in recent history. At the same time, the armed capacity of the drug-trafficking gangs exceeds that of many states in the world. This scenario is all the more alarming when one considers that there has been no substantial change during the last three decades. In Mexico, we have seen since the 1970's a process of deterioration in the capacity of the state to deal with the threat posed by the drug trade. All the measures taken, with the approval of the United States government, seem ineffective in reducing the flow of drugs to the United States, or in coping with the violence and corruption that this phenomenon generates. This situation contrasts with the constant effort of both the U.S. and Mexican governments to hide the evident failure of the anti-drugs strategies implemented in recent years.

Why this growing inability to fight drugs? Why has there been no change in the drug-fighting strategy? Why has the United States tried to hide its failure in the Mexican case? Why is the Mexican government following the same strategy that has proved ineffective in stopping the corruption and violence that drug trafficking generates? Lastly, what are the effects of the anti-drug strategy in terms of violence and corruption, and is there any alternative to these problems that challenge the capacities and the very existence of the Mexican State?

The main hypothesis I will advance in this essay is that both the U.S. and the Mexican governments are trapped in the present anti-drugs strategy a strategy that provokes high levels of violence and corruption, and that cannot be challenged because it is supported by a majority of the American public. Even more: a change in the anti-drug strategy is impeded by the interest that both the U.S. and the Mexican governments have in hiding the failure of the Mexican anti-drugs efforts, since such a failure could significantly affect the bilateral agenda and generate instability in Mexico. In other words, as will seen below, a change in strategy presupposes the acceptance of failure by the U.S. and Mexican governments, and this price is too high to pay in terms of legitimacy and stability. As a result of these constraints, the U.S. and Mexican governments are impelled to play a kind of simulation game, in which the main goal is

not to stop the trafficking of illicit drugs into the United States, but rather to convince the American public that the Mexican government is doing its best to stop it.

In the first part of this paper, I will review how the Mexican government has developed various strategies to confront the drug trade since the 1970's, when the problem first gained visibility in the public eye and in Mexico's foreign relations. I will show how Mexican government's combat of drugs generated an internal and external dynamic, a vicious circle, that fed the advance of corruption in Mexican life. In the second part, I will analyze the contradictions of the present strategy to combat drugs, and propose possible alternatives. Finally, I will draw some conclusions about present and future strategies and policies.

I. Combating Drug Trafficking In Mexico Since The 1970's: An Overview.

Drug trafficking was not an issue in Mexican domestic politics or international relations until the end of the 1960's. The reasons for this are several. Mexico itself was not a very important country in the international arena; the interest of the international community in Mexico (except for the U.S. government which had an interest in Mexican stability) was not very high; drugs were not an important issue for the United States; and the power of the drug traffickers was not sufficient to threaten the power of the states. All these features created an environment supportive of the idea that combating drug trafficking was feasible, and that it was one of the state's duties. Drug traffickers were seen during those years as being much like any other criminals; nobody hesitated to use the state's capacity to fight and punish them. Obviously, the years following the end of World War II saw a considerable optimism about the state's capacities, especially in the West. After all, if the Allies could have defeated a world criminal like Hitler, surely there was practically nothing they could not do.

Notwithstanding this, in 1969 the first so-called "Operation Intercept"¹ made it clear to the Mexican government that drugs could be a problem in Mexico's relations with the United States. The pressure that the Nixon Administration put on its traditional ally attested to the emerging importance of the problem, and this was quickly understood by the Diaz Ordaz Administration, which reacted promptly to the pressures. After this, a period of cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. ensued. "Operation Intercept" was replaced by "Operation Cooperation" to fight the traffic and cultivation of illicit drugs in Mexican territory. This program gave birth to the Mexican government's most successful anti-drugs campaign of the post World War II period: "Operation Condor". This campaign had clear effects on the two Mexican drugs exported (marijuana and heroin). Production of heroin decreased from 85 percent of the total volume introduced to the U.S. in 1974 to 37 percent in 1980. The decrease in marijuana entering the United States was still more evident: it fell from 90 percent of the American market in 1974 to 5 percent in 1981.

¹ For "Operation Intercept", see Richard Craig, "Operación Intercepción: Una Política de Presión Internacional", *Foro Internacional*, vol. XXII, No. 2, October-December, 1981. pp. 203-230.

The figures were so impressive that they led to a disregard of the effect they were having on the broader drug-fighting strategy. The campaign's success bolstered the Mexican government's conviction that its strategy was the right one, and proof of what a country (even an underdeveloped one) could do with decisiveness and political will. This was probably its most pervasive and everlasting effect: it reinforced the idea that states can, in fact, combat drug trafficking effectively, and it increased the enthusiasm of the United States for the idea of fighting the drug-trade in the source countries themselves. However, a broader view of the effects of the "Operation Condor" presents us a darker panorama. The Mexican success contrasted sharply with the failure of the U.S. in combating drug trafficking in other countries. Even when Mexican production of marijuana and heroin decreased sharply, the amount of drugs arriving into the United States continued to grow. What happened is what has been called the "balloon effect": the decrease in drug production in one country is replaced by a similar increase in drug production elsewhere. In the case of Mexican production of marijuana and heroin, both Colombia and the "Golden Triangle" countries of South East Asia stepped in to meet the demand.

The 1980's demonstrated that the enthusiasm generated for the Mexican anti-drug efforts in the 1970's was not solidly grounded. During that decade, Mexico positioned itself once again as one of the major providers of marijuana and heroin to the United States, and one of the most important transit points for cocaine shipments to American territory. The reasons for Mexico's changing role are both domestic and international. Among them, one can cite climatic conditions favoring the cultivation of marijuana and heroin poppies; the resurgence of Colombia as a major cocaine producer, which made Mexico an ideal transit point; the deterioration of the Mexican economy, which made the cultivation of illicit drugs more attractive to peasants; the deterioration of Mexico's anti-drug campaign as a result of corruption in the Mexican anti-drug forces; the bureaucratic inertia of the Mexican offices involved;² and, finally, the success of the Florida Task Force interdiction campaign against marijuana production in Colombia, which in turn boosted Mexican production.³

All of these factors created an environment in which drug trafficking became a growing problem, one that was able to threaten the Mexican state and poison U.S.-Mexican relations as well. The characteristics of the drug phenomenon during the 1980's included the increasing production of drugs in Mexico, and the evident incapacity of the Mexican state to combat drug production and trafficking. These factors placed in doubt the anti-drugs strategy pursued by the Mexican government, to an extent never before seen. The capacity of the state to fight drugs was challenged not

² These reasons are mentioned by Richard B. Craig, "U.S. Narcotics Policy toward Mexico: Consequences for the Bilateral Relationship", in Guadalupe González and Marta Tienda (eds.), *The Drug Connection in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, San Diego: Center for U.S. Mexican Studies, University of California, 1989, pp. 75-77.

³ See Bruce Michael Bagley, "U.S. Foreign Policy and the War on Drugs: Analysis of a Policy Failure", *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 30, Nos. 2 and 3, Summer/Fall 1988, p. 199.

only by traditional critics of the “punitive” approach, but also by members of the American government.⁴ The criticisms were fueled by incidents like the kidnapping and assassination in 1985 of the DEA Agent, Enrique Camarena, apparently in complicity with Mexican authorities.

During 1985 and 1986, the American media ran plenty of stories about narco-corruption in Mexico. These exposés buttressed the growing criticism of the Mexican government’s inability to maintain domestic stability. This is not the place to enter into a detailed evaluation of the criticisms, or to make an inventory of the incidents that led to the deterioration in U.S.-Mexican relations during those years. However, it is worth mentioning that the image of Mexico in the United States had not been so abysmal since the nationalization of oil in 1938. The diplomatic conflict with the U.S. also reached levels not seen for decades.

But the situation changed abruptly in 1987. Charles Pilliod, who replaced John Gavin as U.S. Ambassador in Mexico in 1986, dedicated himself to restoring cordiality in U.S.-Mexican relations. The reasons for the change are varied, but are certainly related to the high levels of instability in Mexico during these years, and the possibility that this instability could increase. On the issue of drug trafficking, there was one clear effect: both governments decided to put conflict behind them. This decision, strengthened during the NAFTA negotiations from 1990 to 1994, propelled the U.S. and Mexican governments into a game of image-making in which the goal was to downplay Mexican failures in combating drug trafficking, and stress Mexican achievements.

The certification process

In this context, and arguing the necessity of improving the effectiveness of the fight against drugs, the United States established in 1986 the process of certification, which consisted in analysing each year the efforts made by drug-producing and transporting countries. Every year, approximately thirty countries were subjected to this process. If the White House decided to deny certification to any country, the consequences could include a refusal of financial aid and, evidently, strong political pressures. The effect of the process was exactly the same as the effective anti-drugs campaign of the 1970’s. It created the image that some countries were making substantial achievements in the fight against drugs. In other words, the process of certification helped some countries to hide their weaknesses and failures in fighting drugs, because what the process measures is the political will to fight the phenomenon, and not the effectiveness in doing so.

⁴ These criticisms were evident during the hearings at the U.S. Senate, sponsored by Senator Helms in May 1986. For those hearings see Juan Gonzalez (et. al.) “El impacto de las Audiencias Helms en la relación bilateral”, Carta de Política Exterior Mexicana, Mexico: CIDE, Año VI, No. 2, April-June, 1986; Tom Morganthau and Elaine Shannon “Presumption of Guilt”, Newsweek, May 26, 1986, pp. 17-18; Joel Brinkley “U.S. Aides Accuse Mexico as Drug Trade Surges”, The New York Times, May 12, 1986, and from the same author, “U.S. Aides Harshly Assail Mexico On Drugs, Immigration and Graft”, *The New York Times*, May 14, 1986, p. A-1 and A-8.

In Mexico's case, the certification process was a very effective way of privileging cooperation over conflict in the bilateral relationship, by obscuring Mexico's ineffectual drug-fighting strategies. Since the implementation of the process in 1986, Mexico has been fully certified each year even when, in some cases, there was insufficient evidence that the government was doing its best, at least according to the criteria established by the U.S. government. These criteria can be summarized as follows: seizures and eradication; number of arrests; arrests of big drug "czars"; casualties in the fight against drugs; budget resources spent in the anti-drug effort; legal and institutional reforms; and international commitments and agreements (especially those signed between the U.S. and Latin American countries).⁵ Obviously, the problem with these criteria is that they are not hard indicators of political will, much less of effectiveness. Any country has a margin of maneuver in applying these indicators. In addition, the line between lack of political will and lack of capacity is not well marked. The effect of using these indicators is that the United States has also claimed a margin for maneuver in certifying some countries, even when effectiveness is poor or when the commitment to fight drug trafficking is inadequate.

Combating drug trafficking under Salinas: fulfilling the indicators.

The Salinas Administration, it seems, understood very well the importance of fulfilling the indicators associated with the certification process. If we look briefly at Mexico's performance, the improvement made during the Salinas Administration were remarkable. If we look at seizures and eradications, on the other hand, both evinced a slight growth during the Salinas years,⁶ to the point that Attorney-General Jorge Carpizo could state in July 1993 that Mexico occupied first place in seizures in Latin America.⁷ However, this tendency decreased during the Zedillo Administration. Regarding budgetary allocations, official figures are available for 1991. For that year, the amount of money dedicated to fighting drug trafficking was 354,180 million pesos (about US \$100 million).⁸ According to non-official sources, the amount Mexican government spent annually in fighting drugs was calculated by the end of 1994 in around \$500 million.⁹ This figure could have been affected by the devaluation of the peso in December 1994, but in any case, it is possible to identify an increase in the anti-

⁵ These criteria are explained in Jorge Chabat, "The combat of drug trafficking under Salinas: the limits of tolerance" Mexico: CIDE, 1995 (mimeo).

⁶ Jorge Chabat, "Drug trafficking in the U.S.-Mexican Relations: what you see is what you get" in Bruce M. Bagley and William O. Walker III (eds.), *Drug trafficking in the Americas*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers / North-South Center, 1994, pp. 373-394.

⁷ Héctor A. González, "Al Aplicar la Justicia no Pueden Existir Simpatías: Carpizo", *El Financiero*, July 15, 1993, p. 37.

⁸ Data taken from Guadalupe González, "Los límites internos...", *op. cit.* These figures do not take into account inflation, which was particularly high during the 1980's.

⁹ Drug Strategies, "A Review of US International Drug Control Policy", November 15, 1994 (mimeo) 42 pp.

drugs budget during the Salinas Administration.¹⁰ Arrests also increased substantially: during the Salinas' *sexenio* they numbered more than 100,000, compared to about 52,000 during the De la Madrid government.¹¹

Considering the issue of legal and institutional reforms, the Salinas government was very active after the Cardinal Posadas assassination in the city of Guadalajara on May 24, 1993. A month later, on June 17, the National Institute for the Combat of Drugs was created as a means of establishing greater coordination in the fight against drug trafficking. The Institute, however, was closed on April 1997, after the arrest of its director, General Gutierrez Rebollo, on charges of corruption. In December 1993, the Criminal Code was reformed to increase the length of sentences for drug traffickers and the number of days they could be held in custody. The architects of the reforms also sought to facilitate the confiscation and sale of goods belonging to drug traffickers and the authority's access to information about drug trafficking.¹² In July 1993, the Mexican government also modified the Federal Fiscal Code establishing the requirement to notify the authorities of the entry of foreign exchange to Mexico in amounts exceeding US \$10,000. As well, since 1990 money laundering has been defined as a felony.¹³

Concerning international collaboration, the Salinas Administration showed a notable will to maintain and further develop agreements aimed at fighting drug trafficking. Actually, an important tradition already existed of supporting international agreements in both global and regional fora. Mexico signed the Single Convention of 1961 and the Vienna Convention of 1988. But collaboration with the United States has been more problematic. Certainly, U.S. anti-narcotics forces have operated in Mexico since the 1960's,¹⁴ but this has been a source of conflict between the two countries. In 1992, reacting to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to authorize kidnapping on foreign territory of persons sought for prosecution by the American justice system, the Mexican government implemented a bill to regulate the "temporary stay of agents representing foreign governments offices that are in their country in charge of police,

¹⁰ In a press conference on November 13, 1997, The Mexican Secretary of foreign affairs, José Angel Gurría, said that Mexico was spending around one billion dollars per year. See Rosa Elvira Vargas, "Esencialmente transnacional, el tráfico ilegal de armas: Gaviria", *La Jornada*, November 14, 1997, p. 5.

¹¹ From 1989 to 1994, the total of persons arrested was 103,414. For this data see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, April 1994, p. 163, and April 1995, p. 147. see also Amparo Trejo, "Reconoce Gobierno infiltración de narcos", *Reforma*, November 30, 1994, p. 1. During the De la Madrid period, the exact amount of arrests was 52,711. For this data, see Guadalupe González, *op. cit.*

¹² United States Department of State, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, April, 1994. See chapter on "Mexico". See also Héctor A. González, "El Narcotráfico ha Desestabilizado Economías Nacionales. Aseguran Reformas a la Ley Para Impedir el Lavado de Dinero", *El Financiero*, September 2, 1993, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.* See also "Apoyará la SHCP a Autoridades en Casos de Narcotráfico", *El Financiero*, June 16, 1993, p. 38.

¹⁴ Kate Doyle, "The Militarization of the drug War in Mexico", *Current History*, vol. 92, No. 571, february 1993, pp. 83-88.

inspection or surveillance functions in law enforcement, as well as specialized technicians".¹⁵ Moreover, as a protest against the Supreme Court decision, the Salinas government rejected financial assistance channeled by Washington through the International Narcotics Control Program.¹⁶

Nevertheless, some projects of collaboration with the United States were mounted, such as the Northern Border Response Force, created in 1990 and known in Spanish as "Operación Halcón". This mechanism was evaluated as unsatisfactory in a General Accounting Office Report by the U.S. government in May 1993. But in the 1994 and 1995 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, released by the U.S. Department of State, it was claimed to be the "centerpiece" of U.S.-Mexican law enforcement cooperation¹⁷ and the "focus of bilateral interdiction efforts".¹⁸ The interest in collaborating with the United States prompted the Mexican government to increase its involvement in anti-narcotics operations in Central America.¹⁹ It seems that collaboration with the Central American countries was fruitful in bringing about the arrest of the drug trafficker Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán, apparently in Guatemala. This arrest was possible thanks to the Hemispheric System of Information.²⁰

All of these examples of fulfilment of certification indicators should not be taken as implying that the drug-fighting strategies of the Salinas de Gortari Administration were particularly successful. There are indications that corruption affected the Salinas government, although it is difficult to say exactly who was involved in it. On the other hand, the growth of some cartels was highly visible, making it difficult to assert that the threat of drug trafficking disappeared during the Salinas years. In concrete terms, the power and influence of the "Gulf Cartel", led by Juan García Abrego, shows that the Mexican state was unable to establish hegemony over the domestic drug cartels. Is this proof of deliberate collusion with the drug "bosses"? Not necessarily. It simply shows a lack of capacity, or lack of will, to successfully confront drug trafficking. Since it is very difficult to draw a line between will and capacity, however, it is difficult to know if the influence of drug traffickers

¹⁵ *Diario Oficial*, July 3, 1992.

¹⁶ Jorge Chabat, "Drug trafficking in the U.S.-Mexican Relations: what you see is what you get" in Bruce M. Bagley and William O. Walker III (eds.), *Drug trafficking in the Americas*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers / North-South Center, 1994, pp. 373-394.

¹⁷ United States Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Report*, April 1994, p.160.

¹⁸ United States Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Report*, April 1995, p. 143.

¹⁹ Alberto Ugalde García, "Compromiso con EU: Involucramiento de México en la Lucha Antidrogas en CA", *El Financiero*, February 25, 1992, p. 35.

²⁰ Víctor Chávez Angeles, "Grupo Especializado Capturó al 'Chapo'", *El Financiero*, June 12, 1993, p. 9. However, some journalistic sources suggested that "Chapo" Guzmán was not really captured in Guatemala. It was even indicated that he was arrested on a ranch in the state of Chiapas, -the property of Javier Coello Trejo, the former Deputy Attorney-General in charge of combating drug trafficking. See Carlos Acosta and Francisco López Vargas, "Más dudas, ahora sobre la versión oficial del arresto de Guzmán Loera", *Proceso*, No. 867, June 14, 1993, pp. 6-7; Ulises Hernández, "Dudas y Confusiones en Guatemala", *El Financiero*, June 12, 1993, p. 9.

can be counterbalanced or not. This seems to be the gordian knot in the fight against drug trafficking, one that impedes an effective feedback of the strategy and hides its manifest failures.

The Zedillo Administration: the final battle?

President Zedillo confronted a complex panorama when it came to combating drug trafficking. On the one hand, corruption had increased substantially during the Salinas Administration, to the point that even fulfilling the indicators required for certification proved a difficult task, as will be analyzed below. Zedillo himself admitted the collusion of Mexican authorities in drug trafficking.²¹ On the other hand, the scandals that arose during the first months of his administration, involving high officials from the Salinas government (including the brother of President Salinas), led to a deterioration in the Mexican government's international image, and placed considerable pressure on Zedillo. It is also worth mentioning that the tolerance of the American public opinion to Mexican government inefficiency and corruption decreased substantially, further highlighting the Zedillo Administration failures in fighting the drug trade.

Another factor that affected Zedillo's anti drug-policies was the unprecedented interest of the American media in Mexican affairs. This made Mexican weaknesses in combating drug trafficking additionally visible, and put added pressure on the government. Finally, the lack of experience and the mistakes of the Attorney-General, Antonio Lozano, in the first two years of the Zedillo Administration, made Mexico more vulnerable to criticism from the outside.

All these factors combined to create a situation in which the weakness of the Mexican state was cast into such sharp relief that even the former masking mechanisms, like the certification process, became seriously problematic. The crisis came during the 1997 certification process, when President Clinton had to make an extreme effort to justify Mexico's certification even confronting the disapproval of an important section of the House of Representatives and the Senate, who forced the White House to make an additional on the subject in September 1997. The factors behind this certification crisis are related to the growing problems that the Mexican government had in fulfilling the indicators demanded of it. The straw that broke the camel's back was probably the government's inability to capture the most-wanted drug trafficker, Amado Carrillo, early in 1997. Traditionally, prior to each certification procedure, the Mexican government had captured a well-known drug lord to satisfy American public opinion. Notwithstanding this, the escape of Amado Carrillo during his sister's wedding made it evident that the Mexican government had serious problems in enforcing the law, even for certification purposes. The February 1997 arrest of the anti-drug "czar", Gral. Gutierrez Rebollo, accused of links with Amado

²¹ Zedillo stated in an interview that "There is evidence that some individuals in the government may have served the narcotraffickers' interests". Geri Smith, "They didn't elect me to have a pleasant time", *Business Week*, April 3, 1995. p. 67.

Carrillo and of complicity in his escape, confirmed the perception that the Mexican government was pervaded by narco-corruption even though Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest was proof that the Mexican State still had some capacity to take meaningful action on the drugs front.

During 1997, other incidents helped to bolster the image, in the eyes of the American public, of a weak and corrupt Mexican state. For example, the same day that President Clinton was scheduled to announce Mexico's certification, the brother of the Gulf Cartel boss left the prison where he was in custody. No local authority could provide a clear explanation for the incident. Some months later, on June 1997, 400 kilos of seized cocaine, held at an office of the Attorney-General in Sonora, disappeared along with the policemen responsible for its security. Additionally, on the 4th of July, 1997—as a birthday present to the United States—Amado Carrillo officially died in hospital after a surgical operation. Surprisingly, the DEA confirmed Carrillo's death before any medical analysis had vouched for the identity of the corpse. It is difficult to know if the body claimed to be Amado Carrillo's was, in fact, that of the drug lord. However, given the background government inefficiency in the fight against drugs, many people viewed Carrillo's "death" as a stunt.²² Finally, it is worth mentioning that other cases of high-ranking military involvement in drug trafficking came to light, besides the Gutierrez Rebollo case, leading some to doubt the utility of placing the military in charge of anti-drug measures.²³ Behind these specific criticisms, there was mounting questioning of the whole anti-drugs policy being pursued by the Mexican government.

It will be apparent that the government's international (and domestic) image was very bad throughout 1997. However, the problem was not only one of image. Although it is difficult to distinguish the violence provoked by drug trafficking from violence caused by other factors, during 1997 there a chain of murders took place, apparently related to the death or disappearance of Amado Carrillo. Certainly, the violent threat posed by the drug traffickers does not pose a threat to the state analogous to that of a guerrilla movement. The traffickers do not want to overthrow the Mexican government or bring about the dissolution of the Mexican state. However, the violence contributes directly to the delegitimization of the Mexican state. A direct consequence has been the use of military to fight drugs. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the military's role in combating drugs, but it is worth mentioning that the ineffectiveness of the Mexican state in coping with the violence also affected the image of the military as an institution.

Still, the most dangerous threat posed by drug trafficking is the corruption it generates. That corruption, as mentioned, has also affected the Mexican Army, posing a serious threat to the legitimacy of the Mexican state. Corruption has also led to an

²² One of the factors that contributed to the lack of credibility was the recognition by the Mexican government of the fact that a skeleton supposedly found in 1996 at a country house of Raul Salinas de Gortari had been deposited there by the Attorney-General's police.

²³ For the involvement of other military figures, see the Mexican magazine *Milenio*, No. 11, November 10, 1997.

atrophying of the Mexican security apparatus, with an impact on the broader capacity of the state to deal with criminal violence. Corruption's effects are even more serious in Mexico's case, because the phenomenon has grown at precisely the time when a political transition is underway, apparently toward democracy. It is difficult at this point to speculate about the relationship between political transition and drug trafficking, but the topic evidently requires further research.

Zedillo's responses

The Zedillo administration has reacted to the threat posed by the drug traffickers as best it could. In 1996, a federal law was passed to aimed at combating organized crime and increasing penalties for drug trafficking. A similar law was approved in May 1997 to confront money laundering, and a Public Security Program put in place to combat crime. At the same time, Zedillo dissolved the National Institute for the Combat of Drugs created during the Salinas Administration, the reputation of which had been besmirched by the arrest of Gral. Gutierrez Rebollo. Zedillo also agreed to the temporary extradition of drug traffickers to the United States, and accepted that U.S. vessels and planes would have access to Mexican airports and ports. Some newspapers reported that DEA agents would be allowed to carry guns on Mexican territory, but this was officially denied by the Mexican government. It is also worth mentioning that the United States government has been collaborating closely with the Mexicans in training and selecting members of a new Mexican anti-drugs unit. This collaboration can be seen as an implicit acknowledgment by the Mexican government that its own training processes were not working. It was also an acceptance that the judicial system in Mexico was inefficient. Lastly, it is important to note that the Mexican and U.S. governments have been working closely within the framework of a High Level Contact Group to monitor Mexico's performance in the war against drugs. This group meets regularly to improve collaboration between both countries in this area.

Notwithstanding these efforts, serious doubts remain about Mexico's capacity to fight drug trafficking and, most importantly, the violence and corruption that it generates. The use of the military, and the acceptance of direct surveillance mechanisms from the United States, are symptoms of an exhausted Mexican state that seems overshadowed in many respects by the power of the drug traffickers.

The game of simulation

As we have seen, the interest of the U.S. and Mexican government in eliminating the drug issue from the bilateral agenda set the tone for Mexico's anti-drug policies. Both governments have been impelled to play a game in which the main goal is to demonstrate that the Mexican government is doing its best to fight drugs, and by those means to keep the issue off the diplomatic agenda. This does not mean that the Mexican government is doing nothing to combat drugs, but rather that the White House

tends to exaggerate the successes and hide the failures of these anti-drug efforts.²⁴ The origins of the absurd game lie in the conflicting challenges that the President of the United States faces: on the one hand, to put pressure on Latin American countries (including Mexico) that are producers or transit points; but on the other hand, to avoid placing excessive pressure on Mexico in a way that might expose the weakness of the Mexican government and hinder the broader bilateral agenda, with unpredictable repercussions on stability south of the border. Therefore, only possible strategy to deal with both domestic pressures and the reality of the bilateral agenda is simulation. The fact that the certification process measures the political will and not the final results of the Mexican anti-drug policy only facilitates this game. This game of simulation, however, is reaching its limits in Mexico's case, and the probability is that both governments will seek new ways to satisfy American public opinion without damaging the bilateral agenda.

²⁴ For this argument, see Tim Golden, "To Help Keep Mexico Stable, U.S. Soft-Pedaled Drug War", *The New York Times*, July 31, 1995, p. 1A. See also Tim Golden, "Misreading Mexico: How Washington Stumbled. Mexico and Drugs: Was the U.S. Napping?", *The New York Times*, July 11, 1997, p. 1A.

Conclusions

Mexican anti-drugs policy during the last three decades has been unable to reduce either the traffic of illicit drugs to the United States or the levels of corruption and violence that drug trafficking generates. However, U.S. policy toward Mexico has been an obstacle to seriously revising Mexico's anti-drugs policies. The U.S. interest in a stable relationship with Mexico has had perverse effects in terms of evaluating Mexican performance in this area. The certification process, originally designed to evaluate the fight against drugs in a range of countries, has been transformed in Mexico's case into a means of hiding failures, impeding the kind of feedback that all public policies require, and creating an unending game of simulation. The most damaging effect of the U.S. influence on Mexican anti-drug policies is that it places the Mexican government in a trap that it cannot escape. Meanwhile, violence and corruption are eroding the State. If these tendencies continue, we can expect to see a progressive deterioration in the capacities of the Mexican state, concealed by the rhetoric of the government's "commitment" to meeting the requirements of the certification process. If the certification mechanism fails, the U.S. government will probably find new ways to praise Mexico's efforts in the fight against drugs, without admitting the growing weakness of the Mexican state. The limits of the game are the limits of the Mexican state itself. In the short term, however, we are probably in for more of the same.