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When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of the Mexican Military's Decapitation Strategy Throughout the Course of the Drug War

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**When Heads Roll:
Assessing the Effectiveness of the Mexican Military's Decapitation Strategy
Throughout the Course of the Drug War**

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Chapter 1: **Introduction**

Preface

“Here is the thing about the Mexican Government’s strategic options at the start of the Drug War: they had this very shitty option, they had an even shittier option, and then they had the shittiest of options. So, they went with the shitty option. In the end, it’s all shit.”

- Minister Rodrigo Canales, Political Advisor to the Mexican Ambassador to the United States

I was sixteen years old when the reality of the Mexican Drug War truly sunk in. It was lunch time at school, the cafeteria’s menu for that particular day did not look all that tempting, and my shiny new car - a white sedan I had gotten for Christmas and that I was all-too-eager to show off - was parked right outside. I grabbed a friend and drove to the convenience store, a whopping two blocks away. We bought our snacks, and were just opening the car door when two men came at us. Before I knew what was happening, there was a gun pressed against my head, and a voice to my right shouting at me to hand him the keys. Within a few minutes, they had taken my car, phone, and wallet, leaving me and my friend stranded at the little shop, shaken, and trying to come to terms with what had just happened. I got the cashier to lend me her cell phone, called my mom and the school, and managed to hold it together just long enough for my high school principal to pick me up I waited in her office and then proceed to collapse into my mom’s arms. I spent the next few days in bed, haunted by the feeling of cool metal against my skin.

We were hesitant to file a report, and when we went down to the government offices, were advised against it. After all, it was unlikely we would ever find the car again anyway. Already, people in government were talking in hushed whispers and shooting furtive glances over their shoulders. Already, filing a report was more terrifying than being the victim of a crime. It slowly dawned on me that not only would I never see my car again, the people that had stolen it would probably never face consequences. At that moment, I realized that the Tampico I had grown up in - that small but vibrant and peaceful city nestled on the Gulf of Mexico - was gone. And in its stead emerged something new, something scary and violent and characterized by a looming sense of fear.

This was at the very onset of the Mexican Drug War. What followed were years of chaos: those who could afford it left the city in droves, fleeing to nearby Texas or seeking shelter in the nation's relatively safe capital. Those who stayed would brave years of hiding and seeking shelter after hearing gunshots outside their houses, years of driving alongside military convoys patrolling the streets, and of hiding from transit officers, knowing full well that much of the police force had been bought by the cartels. Worst of all, those who stayed would spend years knowing that no matter your social status, who you were, or what you did for a living, no place was safe. Mexico split up into two almost unrecognizable areas: those where the government still held on to its control, and those deemed the "Narcolands," places where the Cartels established their own shadow government. While areas like Mexico City enjoyed modern comforts, relative peace, and a somewhat effective (if at times corrupt) government, states like my own Tamaulipas became the sites of violent turf wars.

Many blame then-President Felipe Calderon, and the federal government under his command, for the massive, violent upheaval. I once heard a friend refer to his aggressive military

strategy as the equivalent of beating a sleeping hornet's nest with a stick, an analogy that seems all too fitting: the government expected to come in and beat the powerful, well-armed and phenomenally wealthy cartels with a relatively modest military and a flawed, often corrupt federal and state governmental apparatus. Instead of the quick fight the government expected, a war was unleashed, and it would be years before the Mexican military ramped up its intelligence and weapon capabilities enough to even pose a threat to the cartels.

I would be lying if I did not admit that the violent situation at home influenced my decision to leave Mexico and study at Wellesley College. Nestled in one of the wealthiest towns in Massachusetts, and ranked one of the safest colleges in the United States, my small women's college seemed like the perfect escape from the realities at home. This has proved a paradoxical experience: I have spent the last three years isolated from the dangers of my hometown, but wary of those same dangers hurting my loved ones, stuck in a constant state of worry. In the summer of 2013, shortly after finishing my first year at Wellesley, and amidst talks of how much safer and less violent the situation had become, my older brother was cornered in front of our house and almost kidnapped, managing to escape with "only" a heavily bulletted car and a shot, bloody right arm that he was thankfully able to keep. We packed our bags and escaped to Mexico City the very next day, and I flew back to Wellesley shortly thereafter, feeling lucky, thankful and yet simultaneously helpless. I wondered if I would ever be able to go back to the home I had known.

My family lived in Mexico City for about half a year, before finally deeming it safe enough to go back home. In a surprisingly short amount of time, the city had done a turnaround. On one of my most recent trips home, in the winter of 2014, I was shocked to notice an almost entirely changed situation; a city bathed in an almost palpable sense of relief. I was allowed to walk my dog in the park, and saw many others running and walking their own pets, a simple

activity that had for years been unthinkable. New government offices had opened, transit officers were no longer feared (or at least, not as much as before; nobody wants a speeding ticket, after all), and clean parks and other such public services were once again the norm. All of a sudden, new businesses were opening up, abandoned houses saw their owners return, and the occasional luxury car could be seen driving down the street. I saw, in other words, something much beyond what any single statistic or any level of data analysis can tell you: a citizenry that was relieved; still hesitant and careful, but not afraid anymore.

With this perspective in mind, I began to question the methods that we have been using so far to measure the success of the drug war strategy; predominantly, levels of violence. In an area like my city, kidnappings and robberies were commonplace for a time, and yet, as was the case with me and my family, most victims have been hesitant to report them. This of course, poses an obvious problem: without reliable numbers, how can violence levels ever be an accurate indicator of progress? What else can we use to assess the convoluted world that is the dark underbelly of Mexican drug trafficking? More importantly, where did this newfound sudden peace come from, and how do we know if it will last?

It is amidst these questions, doubts and hopes that I approached this thesis: as a researcher, but also as someone who has lived and experienced firsthand the dangers and horrors of the “narcolands.” With it, I hope to inform some on the realities of the drug war, but also, inevitably, seek some answers for myself.

The Puzzle

On December 2006, following a controversial election, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa took the oath of office as Mexico's thirty-sixth president. One of his first acts as president was to deploy thousands of military troops to combat the ever-growing spread of the Mexican drug cartels. An unprecedented increase in violence ensued, and the resulting bloody war disturbed the relative peace that Mexico previously enjoyed. Today, former Mexican President Felipe Calderón's six-year presidential term is widely regarded as the bloodiest period since the Mexican Revolution, and current President Enrique Peña Nieto has not fared much better.

Amid escalating violence, critics have labeled the Mexican government's strategy as ineffective, particularly because of its heavy reliance on the military to counter drug cartels. The cornerstone of this anti-cartel policy has been a kingpin decapitation strategy - which focuses on eliminating the leaders of the cartels in order to disrupt the cartel's operation, and it has been especially hotly contested. Critics make three claims. First, that the strategy was chosen, not as a rational response to violence, but due to international pressure on Mexico's government. Second, that the strategy unnecessarily and unproductively relied on the military, which led to inadequate policing at best, and systematic human rights abuses at worst. And finally, that the strategy itself has been counterproductive, producing more violence than it eradicates. Numerous scholars have suggested that these strategies were mainly the result of increasing U.S. pressure on Mexico to militarize in response to the cartel threat, and compare Mexico's response to infamous U.S.-led initiative: *Plan Colombia*.

I challenge the the literature on all three points. First, on the question of using the military, I suggest that a majority of critics fail to take into account the extent to which Mexican institutions suffered from severe corruption when Calderón took office, and lack a thorough

analysis of alternatives. Faced with a “captured”¹ state where police force and government officials habitually worked for and protected drug cartels, Felipe Calderón had no other choice but to deploy the only institution that had remained relatively uncorrupted: the armed forces. Calderón’s reliance on the military therefore, while not ideal, was merely the best and only option available. Second, I argue that critics misrepresent the goals of the strategy: the primary goal was not to reduce violence; it was to fragment the cartels, and eliminate the threat to the state. By the time that the Mexican government decided to seriously oppose the cartels, they had become far too rich, strong and powerful to be directly confronted. Much like Al Qaeda and similar terrorist organizations, they formed a cohesive, massive system of criminality; hence, much in the way that the United States has sought to dismantle such terrorist groups, the Mexican government sought to splinter and weaken cartels by targeting the leadership.

My third point is then derived from the above: given that critics have misrepresented the goal of the government’s strategic response to the Drug War, the measures that have been used to evaluate success are also inherently flawed. While violence can be one of several markers with which to measure success, in the Mexican case, it is deeply unsatisfying. First of all, violence may actually be a symptom of a floundering cartel going through a process of fragmentation,² rather than an indicator of a failed strategy. I contend that the intent of the decapitation strategy was to fragment the cartels, making them less cohesive, and therefore more manageable. While violence is an incredibly problematic byproduct of fragmentation, it does not tell us whether or

¹ “Silver or Lead,” *The New Yorker*, accessed Feb. 5, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/31/silver-or-lead>.

² Fragmentation occurs as a result of in-fighting between members of the cartel, following a loss of leadership. This in-fighting eventually results in the cartel splitting up and forming new, smaller gangs.

not the cartels are becoming less or more powerful; it is, in other words, an unreliable measure of success. In order to truly analyze the security situation holistically, we would need to measure the government's ability to reassert its control over the cartels, following their fragmentation.

Because of this intended goal, I propose using governability, or the State's ability to exercise its authority over that of the cartels, as the primary measure of success in the Drug War. Overall, a kingpin strategy was the product of very limited options and limited tools. The results have been, by many assessments, disastrous. Since implementing this strategy, violence has escalated. Human rights abuses have been widely reported. Military/police relationships have been thrown out of whack. But, while I do not claim that this strategy has been necessarily a good one, it has largely accomplished its intended goal: to fracture the cartels in order to allow the government to reassert its control.

But how does one measure governability, particularly when the numbers are so highly unreliable? This is where my research comes into play. In order to measure this, I decided to perform a case study, involving Tampico, Tamaulipas. I chose this city as a case study because of several reasons. First of all, Tampico has long been recognized as one of the Mexican cities most affected by the Mexican drug war. Joaquin Lopez Doriga and Carlos Loret de Mola, well-regarded Mexican journalists, have mentioned in the past how dangerous and violent the city had become.³ Often referred to as a "ghost town," the city (as well as the state of Tamaulipas at large) has been known in recent years for deadly confrontations between cartels, numerous kidnappings, and a failing government. In 2010, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s candidate for statewide elections was assassinated by members of an unspecified Drug

³ Carlos Loret de Mola, "UN DIA EN LA VIDA DE TAMPICO (Carlos Loret de Mola)," *YouTube*, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3vxeLWHLM>.

Trafficking Organization (DTO).⁴ For years, Tampico's mayor and other high-level government officials did not even *live* in the city, or even the state, but instead resided in the neighboring American state of Texas, too scared of the dangers within the city they were supposedly tasked with protecting. Tampico and Tamaulipas as a whole have also been, for years, listed among the United States' travel warning advisories.⁵ There are, in sum, few cities that so thoroughly exemplify the sheer devastation caused by the drug war, and thus, few cities that could so well serve as a case study.

My other motivation for choosing this specific city as a case study is simultaneously personal and pragmatic. It is, after all, hard to detach myself from a situation that has so thoroughly affected my family and myself. However, this same conflict also allows me a type of access that few other researchers could even dream of. Raised in Tampico during the height of the drug war, I have not only personally experienced multiple atrocities, but also know many others who have done so. Throughout the course of my research, I spoke to business owners, members of prominent wealthy families, and government officials. My own family's position within society and ties to the community enabled me to interview people within the city who the vast majority of researchers would not have had access to.

All interviewees were contacted through personal connections and a relatively limited network. While this means that my qualitative research was not randomly collected, and is therefore limited by the lack of randomized data, there are two important reasons why I chose this methodology. First of all, I chose the people I interviewed because of their first-hand

⁴ "Asesinado a Tiros El Candidato Del PRI a Gobernador de Tamaulipas | México | ElMundo.es," *ElMundo.es*, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/06/28/mexico/1277746222.html>.

⁵ "Mexico Travel Warning," *U.S. Dept of State*, accessed April 30, 2016, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/mexico-travel-warning.html>.

experience with the cartels as well as their diverse roles within Tampico society. From students to public officials to business owners, my interviews cover a wide range of perspectives, and serve to illustrate how the Drug War has affected Mexican citizens in a multitude of ways. Second of all, this has been and continues to be a sensitive research topic. Journalists⁶, researchers, and even social media activists⁷ that choose to inquire about cartel activities often end up murdered or otherwise terrorized. Because of the security implications, I was only able to interview people with whom I had network connections. Venturing too far outside of this network could have raised dangerous alarms and threatened my own personal safety as well as that of those close to me.⁸ Nonetheless, I believe that working within these limitations, I was able to provide an unusually holistic picture of the Drug War.

I then complemented this qualitative research with quantitative data. First of all, I gathered the past seven years' worth of enrollment numbers of the American School of Tampico; one of the city's largest schools, which serves students from Pre-Kindergarten until the 12th grade. This analysis revealed a significant drop in enrollment numbers from 2007-2012, followed by a slight increase in recent years, reflecting elevated levels of out-of-state migration. Additionally, I analyzed several existing studies that surveyed the levels of violence in both Tampico, and, more generally, the state of Tamaulipas, from 2005-2015. The results were puzzling. While the majority of interviews and other qualitative research indicated that the

⁶ Nina Lakhani, "'Journalists Are Being Slaughtered' – Mexico's Problem with Press Freedom," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/journalists-mexico-press-freedom-photographer-ruben-espinoza-murder>.

⁷ Harriet Alex, "Mexican Citizen Journalist Has Her Own Murder Posted on Her Twitter Account," October 23, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/11183720/Mexican-citizen-journalist-has-her-own-murder-posted-on-her-Twitter-account.html>.

⁸ In addition, Professor Stacie Goddard, my advisor, expressly prohibited interviewing any known drug lords

situation has been slowly improving, the quantitative data indicated little to no improvement, and in some cases, even implied worsening levels of violence. This results in an odd puzzle: why do the numbers and the interviews not tell the same story?

In analyzing these results, I suggest one simple explanation: as I have described previously, government corruption and the wide-reach of cartels means that many people do not file police reports for fear of retribution or because they know police will not assist them. Therefore, in analyzing crime and violence, it is important to consider anecdotal and first-person data as well as reports of crime statistics. In the course of my interviews, I found many people say that the city “felt safer”, and that the situation was “calm” now. However, the data I have collected from the aforementioned government surveys does not reveal a similar change in violence. This could be for several reasons. As I stated in the above, my data is limited in scope. As I will elaborate in my case study chapter, my sample is skewed towards wealthier members of the community, which in itself could account for part of this difference.

However, I believe that a better explanation is that higher reported crime/violence statistics may paradoxically reflect an increase in trust of government. It is possible that there are not more crimes being committed, but simply more people reporting those that are committed. This is an odd disparity that initially seems perplexing, but that may actually be indicative of how violence is actually diminishing. As I will demonstrate in the next chapters, numbers are highly unreliable, because they depend on citizens *reporting* crimes, which they will not do if they do not trust the government to protect them from retribution from the cartels. Much like my family and I never reported my stolen car, a large percentage of Mexicans have been too scared to file a police report, regardless of how grave the crime committed against them may be. As the government has started to reassert its control over Tamaulipas, people have started to feel safer

and report more crimes. In this sense, the state and city-wide situation is improving. My research, therefore, implies that at least in the northern state of Tamaulipas, the government's fragmentation strategy has worked, to some extent.

Ultimately, I am not advocating for more violence, and I also recognize the multiplicity of concerns surrounding the Mexican government's predominant strategy. But in order to analyze the situation we need to be pragmatic. My thesis most aims at recognizing the importance of pragmatic solutions for a highly complex and volatile war. There are no short-term solutions, and there is no simple fix. While reforms and progress are essential in putting an end to the war, in the end, it is impossible to implement reforms or ensure progress unless the State is first able to assert itself over the cartels.

Chapter 2: **Outbreak of the War and Development of the Strategy**

Overview of the Drug Wars

When Calderón assumed office, half a dozen major cartels, and a few lesser ones, claimed control of large swaths of land in Mexico-- a byproduct of decades of unrestricted free reign.⁹ Weak judicial and police institutions, as well as proximity to the world's largest consumer economy automatically made Mexico the ideal breeding ground for one of the world's most sophisticated drug networks. Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) used Mexico's entrenched political system to create "a system-wide network of corruption that ensured distribution rights, market access, and even official government protection for drug traffickers in exchange for lucrative bribes."¹⁰ However, it was only in the late 1980s, in the wake of a systematic attack on Colombia's drug cartels, that Mexican drug organizations rose to their current prominence. As the Colombian route was disrupted, Mexican gangs "shifted from being couriers for Colombia to being wholesalers."¹¹

Once they rose to prominence, Mexican cartels quickly developed a devastatingly effective system. To avoid a disruption of their operations, the cartels routinely bought out Mexican officials at all levels of the government, using the popular phrase "*plata o plomo?*" (silver or lead?) to exemplify the allure of their offer. Say yes and you get a significant bonus.

⁹ Robert Bonner, "The Cartel Crackdown," *Foreign Affairs*, October 15, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2012-05-01/cartel-crackdown>.

¹⁰ William Finnegan, "Silver or Lead," *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/31/silver-or-lead>.

¹¹ Brianna Lee, "Mexico's Drug War," *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/mexico/mexicos-drug-war/p13689>.

Say no and you receive a bullet to the head. Since the *Institutional Revolutionary Party* (PRI), in power since 1929, happily accepted silver, the cartels enjoyed almost complete impunity.¹²

Under this tenuous understanding, the cartels flourished, establishing their dominance in distinct regions. Four major cartels quickly established a deathly grip over different geographical areas of Mexico. The Tijuana Cartel quickly took over major routes in the Western coast of Mexico. The Gulf Cartel (appropriately named) dominated the Gulf Coast. The Sinaloa cartel established itself in the northern state of Sinaloa and surrounding areas. La Familia Michoacana took over the state of Michoacan and southern Mexico.¹³ While the cartels and law enforcement agents originally established a tenuous truce¹⁴, as the cartels grew, so did their thirst for power, and violence began to slowly rise.

In the face of the cartel's expansion, the government proved powerless. Ernesto Zedillo, the last president to emerge from the PRI party's uncontested regime, was the first executive to try to stem the growth of the cartels, but "found that any operations he ordered quickly became compromised because law enforcement officials had been paid off."¹⁵ By the time that Vicente Fox Quesada, a candidate for the *National Action Party* (PAN) and Calderon's immediate predecessor, uprooted the decades-long rule of the PRI party in 2000, the cartels had grown tremendously powerful, and the government could do little to oppose them. Fox, seeing no real reason to challenge the *status quo*, and discouraged by the failures of the previous administration, decided to mostly turn a blind eye to the cartels' operations.

¹² Bonner, "The Cartel Crackdown."

¹³ "Tracking Mexico's Drug Cartels Timeline," *Stratfor*, accessed April 30, 2016,

<https://www.stratfor.com/topics/terrorism-and-security/tracking-mexicos-drug-cartels>.

¹⁴ George Grayson, *Mexico* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

¹⁵ Bonner, "The Cartel Crackdown."

By 2006, the cartels reached the apex of their power and Calderón, who belonged to the same party as Fox, took a firmer stand against them. In seeking the presidency, the Harvard-educated moderate made fighting crime one of his central campaign promises. Therefore, as soon as he came into power, he strengthened the military. While Fox committed “an average of 19,291 troops annually to battling drug trafficking, this figure soared 133 percent to 45,000 during the Calderón *sexenio* (six-year term). In 2009 alone, the Army assigned 48,750 men to combating narcotics syndicates...”¹⁶ But violence only escalated, spiraling dangerously out of control.

To counter the growing spread of cartel influence, the Calderon administration originally envisioned a strategy that rested on five different pillars: in addition to 1) the joint military operations to support state and local police that have been so publicized, Calderón intended to 2) implement a gradual technological and operational buildup of law enforcement agencies, 3) implement a reform of the country’s institutional framework at large, 4) institute an active crime prevention policy, and 5) strengthen international cooperation. These pillars, however, were assigned massively different priority statuses based on their feasibility, leading to a lopsided approach. In reality, rather than the 5-prong approach that was originally proposed, Calderon’s strategy morphed into a military-heavy kingpin targeting strategy.

Under this approach, over 45,000 members of the military were deployed (and continue to participate) in joint military operations; a 130% increase from the numbers deployed in the previous administration.¹⁷ This approach has translated into the military increasingly becoming a part of law enforcement; “federal forces mounted checkpoints, carried out (large-scale) raids, and

¹⁶ George Grayson, “The Impact of President Felipe Calderon’s War on Drugs On the Armed Forces: The Prospects for Mexico’s ‘Militarization’ and Bilateral Relations” (U.S. Army War College Press, December 31, 2012). Pg. 3

¹⁷ Eduardo Guerrero Gutierrez, “La Estrategia Fallida,” *Nexos*, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=15083>.

seized consignments of drugs; in some cases, they (completely overtook) police operations, even down to traffic control duties”.¹⁸

The military thus became the primary enforcement mechanism for the fight against drug trafficking. And, because the military is trained primarily to achieve its mission through raids and other quick strikes, decapitation took center stage as the military’s preferred strategy.

Policy Response and Theory: Decapitation as the Primary Strategy

The limitations of having to rely almost exclusively on the military to counter the expanding power of the DTOs easily led, in turn, to the birth of Mexico’s kingpin decapitation strategy. Decapitation is a strategy meant to disrupt an enemy’s activities by eliminating its military or political leadership, usually in the form of either capture or murder.¹⁹ While literature on this subject is deeply conflicted, there are a number of good reasons why the strategy might have been chosen.

First of all, this strategy has in fact been used by the United States²⁰ and Israel in targeting terrorists for a number of years, and continues to be the subject of deep discussion and academic debate. While scholars like Jenna Jordan²¹ and Robert Pape²² maintain that

¹⁸ Diana Villiers Negroponete, *The End of Nostalgia: Mexico Confronts the Challenges of Global Competition* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Gideon Brough et al., “Decapitation Strategy, Decapitation Strategy,” in *The Encyclopedia of War, The Encyclopedia of War* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781444338232.wbeow163/abstract>

²⁰ Victor D. Hynes Lieutenant Commander, “Decapitation Operations: Criteria for Targeting Enemy Leadership,” n.d.

²¹ Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 2, 2009): 719–55, doi:10.1080/09636410903369068.

decapitation produces marginally positive results, at best, and in most cases, actually worsens the situation;²³ others, like Patrick B. Johnston - a leading scholar on the effects of decapitation strategy in counter terrorism organizations - actually note that:

In recent years, a scholarly consensus has emerged that leadership decapitation rarely helps states to achieve their goals. This conventional wisdom, however, is largely anecdotal; beyond a few well-known cases—in particular, the Israeli experience—there has been little systematic study about whether removing militant leaders helps or hinders efforts to degrade and defeat militant organizations.²⁴

Johnston argues that, “governments (are) more likely to defeat insurgencies following the successful removal of top insurgent leaders, but this probability was estimated at around 25 to 30 percent” (Johnston, 77). Through his findings, he establishes “bottom lines,” which he describes as such:

- 1) Evidence suggests that killing or capturing militant leaders: increases the chances of a rapid end to insurgencies; enhances the probability of campaign outcomes favorable to counterinsurgents; reduces the intensity of violent conflict; and shrinks the number of insurgent-initiated attacks, such as armed attacks and kidnappings.
- 2) Despite warnings by public officials and terrorism analysts, there is little evidence that killing or capturing insurgent leaders causes blowback violence.
- 3) Killing or capturing militant leaders can be a useful tool, but it is more effective when integrated into a larger counterinsurgency strategy.

²² Patrick Johnston, “Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Counterinsurgency Campaigns,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, September 24, 2010.

²³ Jenna Jordan compiled a comprehensive data set of 298 cases of leadership decapitation from 1945-2004, and concluded that decapitation was ineffective, even at times counterproductive. Critics are also quick to warn of a backlash effect: rather than reducing the threat, leadership decapitation may result in a “martyrdrom” effect, enraging locals and propelling them to join the cause (although this analysis is far more likely to apply to ideologically motivated causes, such as terrorism, rather than for-profit ones, like DTOs). (Jenna Jordan, 2009)

²⁴ Johnston, “Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Counterinsurgency Campaigns.”

4) Counterinsurgents are more successful in campaigns in which they decapitate the insurgent leadership than in those in which they do not, regardless of the group's aims or ideology.²⁵

Meanwhile, another leading scholar in the subject of decapitation, Bryan Price, similarly concludes that decapitation is effective, although not a silver bullet. While there are a number of major differences between the ideologically-motivated terrorist organizations that the U.S. and Israeli governments have traditionally targeted, and the profit-based Mexican cartels, the United States' history of reliance on decapitation, coupled with some of the more positive rhetoric surrounding it, might have prompted Mexican officials to select such a strategy.

A second motivation for adopting a strategy of decapitation could have been that decapitation was similarly used in Colombia to target its powerful cartels during the 1990s, thereby serving as a precedent. Notably, Colombia's two largest cartels, the Cali and Medellin Cartels, fragmented significantly following the capture of their respective leadership in the 90s. These captures disrupted cartel operations, which arguably allowed the Colombian government to reassert its control²⁶

Third, it has been suggested that cartel decapitation became the preferred strategy because it allowed for the showcasing of 'strikes' against organized crime whenever a major kingpin was captured or killed. Adopted in part because of its ability to often make splashy headlines, Kingpin capture is a very tangible, very "flashy" method of showing that the government is doing something to address the drug crisis. This flashiness, in turn, looks good to outside

²⁵ Ibid. Pgs. 2-3

²⁶ Daniel Mejia, "Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, 2016, 17. Pg. 2.

spectators, namely, the United States government, which has exercised pressure on Mexico to deliver visible results in their fight against the cartels.²⁷

Without other ways to showcase advances in the drug war, the government is therefore forced to rely on the capture or killing of kingpins as a way of demonstrating progress against the DTOs. Kingpin capture has, after all, been the main metric of success publicized by the federal government, and therefore, has also become a high priority.²⁸ Just in the two years following the publication of Mexico's Most Wanted "Capos" list, twenty of the kingpins that appeared on the list were captured or killed, demonstrating the high priority status that the government assigns to kingpin capture.

²⁷ "U.S. Expands Involvement in Mexican Drug War," *NationofChange*, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.nationofchange.org/us-expands-involvement-mexican-drug-war-1312737638>.

²⁸ "Mexico's Kingpin Strategy Against the Drug Cartels," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/16/world/americas/mexicos-kingpin-strategy-against-the-drug-cartels.html>.

Chapter 3: **Criticisms of Calderon's Strategy**

Calderon's strategy has sparked fierce criticism from scholars, policymakers and the media. These critics focus on three main concerns: 1) that the military strategy has been implemented due to international pressure and other external influences, rather than to address the goal of civilian protection, 2) that the military has been over-used, to the detriment of other alternative strategies; and 3) that the use of the military and particularly the ensuing reliance on decapitation has led to an increase in violence levels. In this chapter, I will elaborate on these three main points of contention, before moving on to systematically addressing them in the coming chapters.

Critique #1: External Influences and Pressures: U.S., Plan Colombia, and the Merida Initiative

In October 2007 presidents George W. Bush and Felipe Calderón announced the Merida Initiative, a joint undertaking set to confront growing challenges by organized crime, especially drug-trafficking organizations, to democratic governability in the region. Named after the city where they had met in March of 2007, the “Mérida Initiative” quickly drew comparisons with “Plan Colombia,” which also targeted trafficking-related crime in Latin America, albeit that of a Southern Neighbor.

“Plan Colombia” was a joint partnership between the United States and Colombian government; It was in some ways an extension of the “War on Drugs” that the U.S. had begun waging since the 1970s. The Colombian government had struggled with the presence of the world’s two most powerful DTOs, the Medellin and Cali cartels since the 1980s. However, after the capture of Pablo Escobar and the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers (leaders of the Medellin and Cali cartels respectively), the two cartels collapsed into smaller gangs that did not pose as much of a threat to the Colombian state anymore, but that, motivated by power struggles and infighting, caused the homicide rate in Colombia to reach its peak in 1999 (not unlike the current situation in Mexico).²⁹ At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that guerrilla groups in Colombia, such as the FARC, stopped receiving international funding, which incited them to enter the drug business to continue funding their activities. The ensuing increase in cocaine production and rapidly deteriorating security conditions led to the announcement of a joint U.S.-Colombia strategy for the fight against organized crime and illegal narcotics: *Plan Colombia*. The main objectives of the strategy were straightforward: 1) reduce the production and trafficking of illegal narcotics by 50% within the next six years; and 2) to improve the security situation by regaining control of the large areas of the country that were in the hands of armed groups.³⁰ To accomplish these goals, the United States government provided an average of US\$540 million per year between 2000 and 2008 to fund the military component of Plan Colombia. The Colombian government, for its part, invested approximately US\$812 million per year in the fight against drugs and drug-related organized crime groups; when taken together, these expenditures represented about 1.2 percent of Colombia’s average annual GDP between

²⁹ John Bailey, “Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?,” February 2009.

³⁰ Mejia, “Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs.”

2000 and 2008. While some have praised the strategy for significantly reducing cocaine output and production, others criticize the methods used (such as the spraying of pesticides to kill the coca crops) as ineffective, economically damaging, and anti-humanitarian.³¹

Much like Mexico's own Merida Initiative, Plan Colombia has been met with both begrudging praise and devastating criticism. To be sure, there are some startling echoes between the two initiatives-- an almost inevitable development given the problem that both seek to address-- drug trafficking and its derived security threats. This has, unsurprisingly, prompted accusations that the United States has been heavily involved in Mexico's strategy, pushing towards a strategy that relied heavily on militarization. Both plans were born out of a U.S. desire to neutralize the threat posed to its own national security by the growing spread of cartel influence in its southern neighbors.

Both plans also included a strong military component. The United States invested large amounts of resources and even deployed some of its own soldiers in Colombia. And while there was no U.S. soldier presence in Mexico, U.S. military support was still significant. Under the partnership, the U.S. Congress appropriated more than \$2.3 billion towards police training for Mexican law enforcement officers, delivery of specialized aircrafts, and the provision of non-intrusive inspection equipment.³² Heavy reliance on the military and support for a decapitation strategy were things that the United States already knew, was used to, and liked, in Plan Colombia.³³ This, combined with the sheer flashiness and good publicity caused by the capture of cartel leadership, has led some scholars to conclude that the Merida Initiative, and the

³¹ Ibid. Pgs. 1-5

³² Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, "Merida Initiative," *U.S. Dept of State*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/merida/>.

³³ Guerrero Gutierrez, "La Estrategia Fallida."

Mexican strategy as a whole, was little more than a Plan Colombia version 2.0; or as one scholar suggests, its “half-brother.”³⁴

The ideology underlying the Merida Initiative has, additionally, been questioned. The initiative was first intensely debated in the U.S. Congress, and was approved in part because its proponents stressed that “equipment and training, rather than direct cash transfers, would be offered (to Mexico) to curtail potential corruption”.³⁵ In theory, the goal of the proposal was to provide several types of funding (counternarcotics/counterterrorism/border security; public security/law enforcement; institution building; and rule of law and program support) in order to curb drug, human, and weapons trafficking. Sabrina Abu-Hamdeh notes that, at its inception, the Merida Initiative had 4 objectives: “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.”³⁶ But, while on paper, the Merida Initiative appeared quite clear in its intentions, there have been allegations that “the allocation of Merida Initiative funds suggested that the principal interest of the United States was in counternarcotics and counterterrorism”.³⁷

Scholars have also questioned the way in which the Merida Initiative failed to properly address the more contemporary issues of organized crime and cartels prevalent in Mexico.³⁸ Finally, no Merida funding was allocated toward domestic policy³⁹, prompting further criticism and accusations of U.S.-led military backing.

³⁴ Bailey, “Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?”

³⁵ Sabrina Abu-Hamdeh, “The Merida Initiative: An Effective Way of Reducing Violence in Mexico?,” *Pepperdine Policy Review*, Spring 2011, 37–54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* Pg. 41

³⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 41

Critique #2: Over-Reliance on the Military

There is no shortage of criticisms regarding Calderon's reliance on the military as his primary tool for cartel eradication. Just a few years into the Calderon presidency, citizens began criticizing him for essentially allowing "the military [to] take control of state and local law enforcement bodies, assuming responsibilities for which it [was] not properly trained or funded."⁴⁰ The critics tend to focus on Calderon's reliance on the military and decapitation strategy. Numerous scholars and strategists have forcefully argued⁴¹ that the current administration should prioritize reforming the local police force and the judicial branch instead of devoting money, resources, and energy to the military.

Nathaniel Flannery, a harsh critic of the Mexican military strategy, underscores this problem by comparing it to the crime-ridden situation in Mexico City in the 90s and the eventual rise of community policing. In the 1980s, Mexico City was considered a highly dangerous crime-infested city.⁴² Members of the military were told to patrol the streets, but this did not result in any significant reduction in violence. However, things changed when the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Mexico's leftist party, took control of Mexico City. Immediately, the party took action. Party leadership "installed security cameras, built up community-focused police patrols, and implemented outreach programs to build connections with the most

³⁹ "Mexico's Kingpin Strategy Against the Drug Cartels," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/16/world/americas/mexicos-kingpin-strategy-against-the-drug-cartels.html>.

⁴⁰ Michael Busch, "Mexican President Calderon: Kingpin of the Kingpin Strategy - FPIF," *Foreign Policy In Focus*, May 15, 2012, http://fpif.org/mexican_president_calderon_kingpin_of_the_kingpin_strategy/.

⁴¹ Greyson, Edward, et al

⁴² Helen Travis, "Is Mexico City Safe?," *From Way Up High*, March 13, 2013, <http://fromwayuphigh.com/is-mexico-city-safe/>.

marginalized neighborhoods in the city.”⁴³ The results were outstanding, and according to Flannery, demonstrate the value of community policing. Now, twelve years since the PRD cemented its power in Mexico City and restored order, the city is a relative oasis of peace and calm despite the drug war that rages in the rest of the country⁴⁴ and is notably absent from the U.S. Department of State’s list of travel warnings.⁴⁵ Flannery is of the opinion that the rest of the country should follow in Mexico City’s footsteps.

A second big criticism to the strategy is that the military is not traditionally equipped to handle civilian situations in the way that the police force is supposed to be. Numerous scholars and strategists, such as John Bailey and Lucia Dammert, have forcefully argued that deploying Mexico’s armed forces was a mistake, and that the current administration should prioritize reforming the local police force instead of devoting money, resources and energy to the military. Cries for increased police involvement stem predominantly from one simple fact: that local police and the military possess a fundamentally different set of capacities, which enable them to perform a certain role. As a scholar has noted,

Combat soldiers lack the capacity to investigate and solve crimes that they did not witness themselves. Based in barracks and rotating frequently in and out, they have no knowledge of the communities they are assigned to protect. They tend to lack police forces’ ability to respond quickly to emergency calls. They lack training in the rules of evidence and working with the justice system, rendering them useless for the difficult task of unraveling complex organized crime networks.⁴⁶

⁴³ Nathaniel Parish Flannery, “Journal of International Affairs,” *JIA SIPA*, April 16, 2013, <http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/calderons-war/>.

⁴⁴ Naomi Tomsy, “Mexico City Myths Debunked,” *Pastemagazine.com*, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/06/mexico-city-myths-debunked-1.html>.

⁴⁵ “Mexico Travel Warning.”

⁴⁶ James Baker III, “A Never-Ending Mission: Soldiers as Police in Mexico - Baker Institute Blog,” accessed April 30, 2016, <http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2013/06/a-never-ending-mission-soldiers-as-police-in-mexico/>.

In other words, while a member of the military can target drug traffickers and intercept drug trade, he or she lacks the training to effectively perform the day to day mundane tasks of police officers as civil servants, which include: “crime prevention, immediate response to incidents that directly threaten the security of citizens investigation of all crimes and incidents within a given jurisdiction, and traffic control.”⁴⁷ This presents a clear problem, since “armies are usually not trained for internal policing” which can “lead to ineffectiveness against organized crime or ordinary problems of public security.”⁴⁸ There is, to put it succinctly, a reason why most modern governments are careful to make a distinction between their armed and police forces. As one former U.S. candidate for the Republican nomination infamously declared: “the army is there to kill people and break things;”⁴⁹ while this may be a gross reduction of the military’s duty, it does adequately surmise the way in which the military is viewed as having its own unique function: that of a unit that comes in to get a specific mission accomplished, then pull out once this task has been completed. While there has been a precedent for the military building schools and performing other such civil duties,⁵⁰ particularly in conflict zones such as Iraq, this is far from the norm, and is ultimately not part of its core training. Utilizing the military to perform a job it is not trained to do subsequently opens the door for all other kinds of problems and tensions.

⁴⁷ John Bailey and Lucia Dammert, *Public Security and Police Reform in the Americas* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). Francisco Z., Pg. 94

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mir et al., “‘Kill People and Break Things’: The Very Best of the First GOP Presidential Debate,” *The Nation*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/kill-people-and-break-things-the-very-best-of-the-first-gop-presidential-debate/>.

⁵⁰ Tom Lantos, “‘The Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Iraq,’ Testimony of Sarah Margon,” *Human Rights Watch*, December 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/12/humanitarian-and-human-rights-crisis-iraq-testimony-sarah-margon>.

This leads into the third biggest problem associated with military deployment in urban conflict areas: the fact that it carries the risk of precipitating numerous human rights abuses. Because army forces are traditionally charged with protecting national security (whether that security be threatened by foreign, hostile powers or corrupt and dangerous organizations from within), they tend to prioritize these goals over the safety of individuals. This translates into elevated human rights abuses when the military is the primary enforcer of the rule of law. A good example of this can be observed in Colombia. One of the biggest criticisms of Plan Colombia is that the human rights violations associated with it were unacceptably high. A coalition of human rights organizations reports that during 2000-2008, an estimated 20,000 were killed by paramilitary, guerrilla, and state forces, and more than 2 million persons were displaced. Most of the displaced took shelter in precarious camps around larger cities. Other reports put the number of internally displaced at more than 3 million, with another 500,000 Colombian refugees and asylum seekers outside the country. In all, “Colombia continues to face the most serious human rights crisis in the Hemisphere, in a rapidly shifting panorama of violence.”⁵¹ The same problem is now evident in Mexico. In 2011, *Human Rights Watch* released a 212-page report that found evidence of security forces’ participation in more than 170 cases of torture, 39 disappearances, and 24 extrajudicial killings since Calderón took office in 2006⁵²— a more than fivefold increase in abuses.

A fourth downside of deploying the military forces is that doing so decreases governmental incentive to fix the problem through other means. Sending in armed forces

⁵¹ Bailey, “Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?” qt. Haugaard at Pg. 4

⁵² “World Report 2011: Mexico,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 24, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2011/country-chapters/mexico>.

essentially “retards innovation by taking pressure off governments to move more aggressively on police-justice reform.”⁵³ Sending out soldiers into the street creates the illusion that the government is acting, regardless of how effective this action may actually be. If the public and international community at large sees that the government is doing *something*, it is much more likely to be forgiving of its slow progress. In the case of Mexico, there has been considerable rhetoric in favor of increasing the transparency and effectiveness of the police forces and the judicial system, but actual progress has been extremely slow.⁵⁴ While Calderón vowed to increase transparency in the judicial branch during his presence, reform stalled considerably⁵⁵, and has only recently gained traction following President Peña Nieto’s (who belongs to the majority party) election. However, even Peña Nieto’s promises have been slow to come to fruition. Judicial reform has been slow, with only 14 out of 31 states adopting the new standards and procedures (such as the notable addition of oral trials) to the courtroom.⁵⁶ And, while Peña Nieto promised to build a massive, federal elite police force he has been slow to deliver. The force consists, so far, of 5000 members, a decidedly smaller number than expected. It is easy to conclude that the visible presence of the military has, in some way, deflated pressure from the government to some extent, delaying progress in critical areas.

Finally, military involvement can also imply the inculcation of military organization and culture in shaping reformed police forces. It has been noted that sending in the military to

⁵³ Bailey, “Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?” Pg. 11

⁵⁴ Rodrigo Canales, Interview/Minister Canales/Summer2015, July 14, 2015.

⁵⁵ Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira and David Shirk, “Criminal Procedure Reform in Mexico, 2008-2016: Final Countdown for Implementation,” *Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego CA*, 2015. Pg. 4

⁵⁶ Ibid.

perform police work challenges fragile civil-military relations, and this is the basis for most developed nations maintaining such a strict separation between the two, since:

With civilians relying on the military even for protection from their fellow citizens, the armed forces have far greater bargaining power. It becomes much harder to say “no” to the officer corps on issues like budgets, punishing abuses or corruption, or stopping them from assuming still other civilian roles. The civil-military balance is a key reason why U.S. law strictly prohibits the military’s use in police duties, except under very rare, very temporary emergency circumstances.”⁵⁷

We need not look too far away to find examples of such a problematic dynamic. In 2014, police forces armed with military equipment and riot gear were deployed to the city of Ferguson, Missouri. This was in direct response to widespread protests, in the wake of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown’s death at the hands of a police officer. The police force’s use of military grade weaponry sparked a controversy on both sides of the political aisle, with some stressing the need for such gear because of the tense and violent situation, and others protesting such extreme tactics used on American citizens. Paul Szoldra, an army veteran who fought in Afghanistan, was particularly critical of this decision, comparing his time in a war zone to the situation in Ferguson, stating that while “We looked intimidating, but all of our vehicles and equipment had a clear purpose for combat against enemy forces. So why is this same gear being used on our city streets?”⁵⁸ There is something eerie about the use of the military in times of peacetime, particularly for internal matters. Regular citizens do not like to see the lines between the military and the police blurred, and any situation in which such a line gets blurred is ripe for conflict.

⁵⁷ Baker III, “A Never-Ending Mission: Soldiers as Police in Mexico - Baker Institute Blog.”

⁵⁸ Paul Szoldra, “This Is The Terrifying Result Of The Militarization Of Police,” *Business Insider*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/police-militarization-ferguson-2014-8>.

It is clear, then, that deploying the military in such a situation was not an effective, or maybe even advisable strategy. This incites the question at the centerfold of my thesis: if deploying the military to counter drug-trafficking operations poses so many challenges, then why would the Mexican government not only choose the strategy in the first place, but also continue to invest the bulk of its resources towards it?

Criticism #3: Increase in Violence Following Decapitation

Since the beginning of the Drug War, homicide rates and violent kidnappings increased *dramatically*.⁵⁹ Thousands of people have “disappeared,” clandestine graves have popped up by the dozens, and events like the Ayotzinapa crisis⁶⁰ have revealed the extent to which this war has shaken the country. And much of this violence has been directly attributed to the country’s decapitation strategy.⁶¹ Amidst this overwhelming and dramatic increase in violence, scholars have been swift to come to one conclusion: the strategy is not working; and they point to the general concept of “violence” in Mexico rising as undeniable, inarguable truth that the government has been essentially wasting its time for the past 10 or so years.⁶² Violence has, in

⁵⁹ Kimberly Heinle, Cory Molzahn, and David Shirk, “Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2014,” *Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego CA*, April 2015.

⁶⁰ Delia Arias, “Ayotzinapa: For Better or Worse, Mexico’s Turning Point,” *The Huffington Post*, 50:01 500, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/delia-m-arias-de-leon/ayotzinapa-for-better-or-b_6188282.html.

⁶¹ William Neuman, “As Drug Kingpins Fall in Mexico, Cartels Fracture and Violence Surges - The New York Times,” accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/world/americas/as-mexico-arrests-kingpins-cartels-splinter-and-violence-spikes.html?_r=0.

⁶² Mark Kleiman, “Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars,” *Foreign Affairs*, accessed May 1, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2011-09-01/surgical-strikes-drug-wars>.

short, become the predominant way of measuring the success (or lack thereof) of the Mexican government's militarized strategy;

Chapter 4
Addressing Critique # 1
External Influences and U.S. Pressure

In this section of my thesis, I contest the first critique: that reliance on the military was caused by external international pressure, particularly from the United States. At its core, *Plan Colombia* consisted primarily of an eradication campaign; a concerted effort to disrupt the supply of coca leaves within Colombia, thereby starving criminal and insurgent groups of drug-related profits. The United States provided almost half the money for this campaign, and even hired military contractors to deploy in the area. The *Merida Initiative*, by contrast, is significantly smaller in scope, and there is no eradication factor. No American troops or military contractors have been allowed on Mexican soil either. The initiative merely establishes that the United States will provide training, arms and strategic support: a decidedly less involved role than that seen in Colombia. When these factors are coupled with the Mexican military's strong history of anti-U.S. ideology, as well as its negative response to some of the U.S.'s demands (such as its initial refusal to extradite *El Chapo* Guzmán despite U.S. pressure), it seems unlikely that the push towards a military-based solution came entirely from the United States.

I am, of course not necessarily arguing that the United States exerted *no* pressure on the Mexican government; the United States is a powerful and persuasive ally. Its government officials have often expressed their preoccupation with violence spilling over from the border, and it has a history of running anti-drug campaigns, fueled by a concern for its own citizenry. The fact that it provided money and weapons to Mexico proves that it has a vested interest in fighting the crisis that afflicts its southern neighbor.

However, while it is impossible to deny a degree of pressure from the United States (and potentially some influence from *Plan Colombia*) regarding the Mexican strategy, this does not invalidate my argument. While the U.S. might have exerted some pressure in the end, the decision to deploy the military and to adopt a decapitation strategy rested in the hands of the Calderon administration. The government recognized that civil institutions were too weak, federal and local police forces were too corrupt, and the judicial branch was too ineffective to deal with the overwhelming power of the cartels in any meaningful way. This left exactly one option: the armed forces.⁶³ In the end, this a decision by the Mexican government to attack the cartels in the only way it was able to, making the driving force behind Mexico's approach to its cartel problem straightforwardly pragmatic. There was, in simple terms, no other feasible option available.

While it may be tempting to conclude that Mexico's militarization was little more than a response to U.S. pressure, the reality is much more nuanced than that. No crisis exists in a bubble, and lessons learned from past endeavors do tend to make their way into new proposals. It is unsurprising that there are some similarities between *Plan Colombia* and the *Merida Initiative*, and that the United States had a hand in both for the simple reason that both conflicts deal largely with similar issues, and both were deemed relative to U.S. National Security interests. Of course the United States' response in Mexico would be similar to its approach to the Colombian crisis; it is naive to think that the United States would simply allow the situation to develop without doing something about it. However, it is equally naive to suggest that Mexico's response to its own crisis was solely caused by U.S. pressure, or that this response was somehow modeled entirely

⁶³ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Lessons from Mexico's Battle Against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Michoacán," *The Brookings Institution*, accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/09/calderon-felbab-brown>.

after Plan Colombia. In fact, one need only look at the differences between the two crises, and each country's response to them to conclude that Mexico's decisions were its own-- influenced mostly by its own capacities and security needs.

Differences

To start with, it is imperative to understand that both the security situation between the two countries, as well as the two countries' internal government structure, were completely different at the beginning of their respective campaigns. What international spectators and scholars often overlook is the simple fact that, yes, both countries have been affected by drug trafficking, but they have been affected in notably different ways. As John Bailey has surmised, "Colombia is a case of a complicated internal war in which drug production and trafficking play a significant role; Mexico is a case of hyper-violent criminal organizations that use terrorist-like methods to challenge the government and society."⁶⁴ At the height of the Colombian crisis, the State was dealing with two major drug cartels (Medellin and Cali) and an internal insurgency led by armed groups like the FARC--which used drug trafficking to sponsor their own activities-- whose designated aim was not to traffic but to disrupt State activities at the highest level.⁶⁵ It is also worth noting that Colombia was, and remains, a drug *producer*, which inevitably resulted in *Plan Colombia's* focus on coca crop eradication. Mexico, by contrast, perfectly situated between the United States and the rest of Latin America, is a drug *smuggling* country-- its indigenous drug production is minimal. And while it has had to deal with small insurgent movements like the Zapatistas in the South of Mexico, the movements have caught little momentum, and as such,

⁶⁴ Bailey, "Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?"

⁶⁵ Mejia, "Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs."

do not pose a serious threat to the Federal government. Instead, Mexico's problem is that of a series of hyper-violent DTOs that have diversified into an almost mafia-like style of business, where extortion, threats, and kidnappings play a significant role.

More importantly, and as Bailey notes in his essay, the two countries are completely different in size, GDP, and central government structure. If we compare the two countries, Mexico is "more than twice as populous as Colombia, has over forty percent more land area, more than five times the gross domestic product (GDP), and more than three times the central government budget outlays."⁶⁶ Colombia is also a unitary system, even if it does have some notable decentralization, while Mexico is federal. This results in a security apparatus that is markedly different from the one found in Mexico. While Colombia has a national police force that is closely tied to the army, Mexico relies on smaller state and local police forces, and a very small (but growing) Federal police. This marks one of the largest differences between the Colombian and Mexican strategies: Colombia's centralized government and close police-army collaboration is a marked contrast from Mexico's diversified Federal government, where police and military function entirely separate from each other. The glaring differences between the two countries and their respective plans, coupled with the arguments that I will lay out in the next section, lead me to conclude that Mexico's decision to adopt a military strategy was entirely pragmatic, and entirely its own.

⁶⁶ Bailey, "Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative: Policy Twins or Distant Cousins?"

Chapter 5
Addressing Critique #2
The Least Worst Option

In the summer of 2015, I interned at the Press office of the Embassy of Mexico in DC, where I met and interviewed Minister Rodrigo Canales, political advisor and unofficial right hand man to the acting ambassador. In his own very frank manner, he was quick to criticize the government's slow response to the cartel situation, but also expressed his frustration with the predominant analysis of the drug war so far. Most scholars and journalists, he noted, loved deriding the government for its overt reliance on the military; but the situation, in his view, was a lot more nuanced than such scholars would like to admit. It all, he liked to say, came down to this: "There was a shitty option, there was an even shittier option, and then there was the shittiest of options. So the only choice was to pick the least shitty option."⁶⁷

It is hard to overstate the sheer complexity of the security situation that the Mexican government faced at the beginning of the drug war, a direct result of its federalized government structure. Mexico is composed of 31 states, and a federal district, with individual municipalities, constitutions, and governments, all under the control of different political parties. As a result of decades of cooperation between the formerly chief Mexican party, the PRI, and the drug cartels, most of the governors and enforcement officers in these states were on the drug cartels' payroll. Calderon's administration had to deal with 32 different governments, and massive corruption in each. Just to name an example, an affidavit filed in 2012 in a U.S. federal court in Texas revealed that the former governor of Tamaulipas, a state in northern Mexico, accepted millions of dollars

⁶⁷ Canales, Interview/Minister Canales/Summer2015.

from the Gulf Cartel.⁶⁸ This further points like those made by Bailey and Dammert, who claim that “the Mexican state apparatus is marked by overwhelming complexity and limited operational capability, which limits its ability to guarantee public security”.⁶⁹

Similarly, it is hard to overstate the sheer amount of corruption that plagued the Mexican government’s infrastructure towards the beginning of the 21st century. Transparency International’s 2005 Release of their Corruptions Perception Index assigned Mexico a score of 3.5 on a scale of 0-10 (0 being the most corrupt), ranking 66th out of 158 countries worldwide; tied with Ghana, and notably ranking below Colombia (which had a score of 4.0).⁷⁰ By 2010, Mexico’s score had dropped all the way to 3.1, and it had fallen down the rankings to number 98 on the index.⁷¹ By 2015, it had picked up slightly, ranking 95th with a corruption index of 3.5, but these are not particularly encouraging improvements.⁷²

A closer look at Mexico’s internal power structure and judicial procedures reveal even more startling examples of corruption. Between 1995 and 2000, sentencing occurred in only twenty-eight out of every hundred cases tried in lower courts. Thus, impunity is a central

⁶⁸ AP, “U.S. Accuses Ex-Mexican Governor Tomas Yarrington of Taking Cartel Bribes,” May 24, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-accuses-ex-mexican-governor-tomas-yarrington-of-taking-cartel-bribes/>.

⁶⁹ Bailey and Dammert, *Public Security and Police Reform in the Americas*. Intro.

⁷⁰ “Transparency International - The Global Anti-Corruption Coalition,” accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015>.

⁷¹ “2010 Corruption Perceptions Index -- Results,” *Transparency.org*, 2010, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2010/results>.

⁷² Dolia Estevez, “No Improvement For Mexico In Transparency International’s 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index,” *Forbes*, January 27, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/doliaestevez/2016/01/27/no-improvement-for-mexico-in-transparency-internationals-2015-corruption-perceptions-index/>.

problem for public security in Mexico, since only ten percent of the reported crimes are punished and 75 percent of arrest warrants go unserved.”⁷³

As of a survey conducted in 2012, when Calderón stepped down from office, only 7% of Mexican citizens indicated that they had high confidence in their local police, 45% had little confidence, and 25% had NO confidence. The public ministry and judicial courts suffered from similar levels of distrust.⁷⁴ In contrast, 50-55% of the Mexican population had “a lot” of confidence in the marine corps and the Mexican army, 11-28% had “little to some” confidence, and only 2-3% had absolutely no confidence in the armed forces. There is a consensus among scholars and government officials that at the time Calderon took office (and even still today),

“the state police were (...) often on the payroll of the cartels in their respective regions, (they) not only failed to cooperate with the federal police but also regularly protected the cartels and their leaders. The municipal police were even worse: chronically under-trained, poorly paid, and often thoroughly corrupt.”⁷⁵

Often, citizens were more terrified of the police than the cartels themselves. Daniela Gomez, a Tampico native and college student, recalls a terrifying instance where she was stopped by a transit officer, then taken to the local police station, where the officers threatened to rape her and arrest her without cause. As she recalls it, she had been driving around the city earlier that day, in her relatively new car, and a transit officer had asked her to stop, but provided no reason. Next thing she knew, she was on the back of a police car, overhearing two men in the front seat talk about how they were going to take her to the police station and rape her. She was

⁷³ Marcos Pablo Moloeznik, “Public Security and Police Reform in Mexico,” in *Public Security and Police Reform in the Americas* (Pittsburgh University Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ “Encuesta Nacional de Victimización Y Percepción Sobre Seguridad Pública 2012 (ENVIPE),” INEGI, 2012, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/regulares/envipe/envipe2012/default.aspx>. Own Translation

⁷⁵ Bonner, “The Cartel Crackdown.”

lucky; her parents were well-connected, and as soon as they found out, they rushed to the station, where they spoke to the supervisor and got their daughter released (in exchange, of course, for a large “mordida,” a bribe).⁷⁶ But many have not been so lucky. Hence, if the organization that is traditionally tasked with law enforcement and civilian protection cannot be trusted- what else can the State do? While traditionally this should be a civilian police issue, to quote Nathan Jones, a Postdoctoral Fellow in Drug policy at the Baker Institute: “criticizing Mexico’s use of the military in counter-narcotics operations was well and good, but without a viable alternative there was no good policy option *but* the military to quell violence”.⁷⁷

Moreover, this popular claim that the police force that the cartels and the Drug War itself should be handled by a civilian police is, in itself, suspect. According to diverse scholars and public officials, in recent years, organized crime has been designated as a threat to National Security. It has been said that:

The Mexican government now views organized criminal syndicates as a challenge to the authority of the state — penetrating many state and local governments, intimidating government officials in many cities, corrupting thousands of bureaucrats, and even creating shadow governments in many communities.⁷⁸

If we understand the cartels as a national security threat, as opposed to a public safety one, it becomes obvious that the military should be the *de facto* institution to deal with it. .

⁷⁶ Daniela Gomez Braña, Interview/Tampico/Dec.2015, December 28, 2015.

⁷⁷ Nathan Jones, “Mexico’s Use of the Military in the Drug War: Why No Alternative? - Baker Institute Blog,” June 7, 2013, <http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2013/06/mexicos-use-of-the-military-in-the-drug-war-why-no-alternative/>.

⁷⁸ Tony Payan, “Why Mexico’s Military Is Fighting the Country’s Drug War - Baker Institute Blog,” June 6, 2013, <http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2013/06/why-mexicos-military-is-fighting-the-countrys-drug-war/>.

Chapter 6
Addressing Critique #3
Violence as a Measure of Success

I will now contest the third and most damning critique of the Mexican strategy: the claim that the government's Kingpin Decapitation plan has proved to be an utter failure, because it has resulted in increased levels of violence. I address these concerns by arguing three different points.

First, I contend that the actual goal of the strategy has been misrepresented. There is a tendency in academic circles to reduce the drug problem to an issue of violence and public safety, however, this characterization is misleading. I argue that the intended goal of the decapitation strategy was actually to fracture the cartels, thereby weakening them and making them easier to control. This in turn makes violence an unsatisfactory measure of success, for it fails to measure the real motivation behind the strategy: to allow the Mexican government to reassert its control over the cartels.

Second, and following from this intended strategy, violence has become an increasingly complicated variable to measure, due to the diversification of violence that has occurred following cartel fragmentation. Cartels have split up into smaller gangs and groups, causing the increasingly messy confrontations that obscure the source of violence. While at the beginning of the drug war fighting mainly occurred between the cartels and the military, and cartels against other cartels, fragmentation has resulted in cartel infighting, leading to a third source of conflict: intra-cartel fighting. This complicates the concept of violence significantly; not only do we become unable to determine the source of conflict, but as cartels fragment and become smaller gangs, they struggle to continue receiving money by any means available. No longer possessing

the monopoly over large drug trafficking routes, these “cartels” then turn to kidnappings, extortion, and petty theft. Violence, then, becomes an exceedingly complicated measure of success.

Third, even if violence as a measure had not become so complicated, there is the simple fact that the numbers are simply unreliable. As I will further elaborate on in this chapter, little trust in the government has led to significant under-reporting of crimes. The numbers are, simply put, completely meaningless when self-reporting is entirely subject to the trust that citizens put on their local, state and federal government (and this trust is, or at least used to be, minimal).

In this chapter I will address the shortcomings of relying on violence to assess the success of the strategy. After taking into account the flaws in the current literature, I will propose new qualitative measures of improvement in my subsequent case study.

“Fragment and Control” Strategy

Jorge Chabat, a professor at the well-known Center for Research and Training in Economics (CIDE) in Mexico City, has labeled Calderon’s decapitation strategy as a “fragment and control”⁷⁹ strategy. Chabat argues, citing several prominent Mexican politicians, that reducing violence was *not* the immediate goal of the military’s decapitation strategy. Instead, the purpose was to make the cartels weaker through fragmentation, thereby allowing the government to reassert its control over the State.

⁷⁹ Jorge Chabat, “Combatting Drugs in Mexico under Calderon: The Inevitable War,” *CIDE*, December 2010. Pg. 6

This logical thought process is best illustrated by dissecting Peter Lupsha's model of organized crime, which can be used to place the Mexican Cartels' control over the government along a continuum comprised of three different stages: predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic, which describe the relationship between the State and organized crime at any given time. According to Chabat, the Mexican government's current goal might be to scale back organized crime through fragmentation, bringing it back to the predatory (the most manageable) stage of organized crime.⁸⁰

In the predatory stage, the criminal group is typically a street gang, or a group rooted in a particular area, neighborhood or territory. At this stage, criminal violence usually occurs because of defensive necessity, in order to subdue or eliminate enemies, stake a claim over a particular territory, or to establish a monopoly over the illicit use of force in an area. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, in the predatory stage the "criminal gang is the servant of the political and economic sectors and can easily be disciplined by them and their agencies of law and order."⁸¹ In other words, this is the most controllable stage of organized crime. Criminal activity is limited to smaller gangs that are subordinate to the nation State's criminal subjugation apparatus.

Criminal gangs develop from the predatory stage into the parasitical as they "develop a corruptive interaction with the legitimate power sectors, and meld their control of a territorial

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Peter Lupsha, "Transnational Organized Crime versus the Nation-State," *Organized Crime 2* (1996): 21–48.

base with the power broker's need for illicit services.”⁸² This stage is highly dependent on political corruption. As criminal activity exerts a stronger, more corruptive influence over the government; cloaking itself in a “patina of legitimacy” as it interacts with the non-criminal, legitimate upperworld; merging with it and extending its reach into the legitimate economic and private sectors of the economy. As it continues to grow, organized crime “extends its influence over entire regions and becomes an equal of, rather than servant to, the state.”

Finally, there is the symbiotic stage of organized crime, in which the parasitic bond between the nation-state and organized crime becomes one of mutuality. The two, in essence, become one and the same. Once an organized group reaches this stage, crime ceases to be a law enforcement problem, but instead, a public policy one. As Lupsha puts it, “the traditional tools of the state to enforce law will no longer work, for organized crime has become a part of the state; a state within the state.”⁸³

If we examine the deterioration of the Mexican government's control over certain areas over the course of the latter half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, it becomes clear that Mexico had slowly moved towards this latter stage of organized crime: police were in the cartels' pocket, impunity was the rule of the land, and local government officials regularly turned a blind eye to criminal activities.⁸⁴ This, obviously, would be an intolerable situation to any government to claims to be modern, prosperous, and sovereign; and certainly one that seeks close ties to the United States.

Fragmentation complicating and diversifying violence

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Chabat, “Combatting Drugs in Mexico under Calderon: The Inevitable War.”

In the past several years, it has become increasingly harder to figure out exactly *who* is causing violence and *how*, because targeting the cartels has created new threats and sources of violence. In other words, killing off the leaders of drug cartels has increased violence by creating new, more bloodthirsty organizations out to make a name for themselves. A 2015 U.S. Congressional Report even noted that “the more stable large organizations that existed in the earlier years of the Calderón Administration have fractured into many more groups.”⁸⁵ The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) originally identified the following organizations as the more “traditional” and dominant cartels: Sinaloa, Tijuana/AFO, Juárez/CFO, Gulf, and La Familia Michoacana.⁸⁶ But since the beginning of the war, the rules and categories have changed, and analysts estimate that as many as 20 major organizations may now exist.⁸⁷ The problem is that, as this process of cartel fragmentation has occurred, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate *who* exactly is causing turmoil. This chart⁸⁸, created by Eduardo Guerrero, a notable scholar of the Mexican Drug War, does an exceptional job of illustrating cartel fragmentation in the early stages of the Drug War:

⁸⁵ June Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations,” Congressional Report (Congressional Research Service, July 22, 2015). Summary.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Eduardo Guerrero, “Towards a Transformation of Mexico’s Security Strategy,” *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 3 (June 27, 2013): 6–12.

Fragmentation of Mexican Cartels

2006	2007-2009	2010 (1 st Semester)	2010 (2 nd Semester)	2011
	Cártel de Sinaloa	Cártel de Sinaloa	Cártel de Sinaloa	Cártel de Sinaloa
		Cártel del Pacífico Sur	Cártel del Pacífico Sur	Cártel del Pacífico Sur
Cártel de Sinaloa	Cártel de los Beltrán Leyva	Cártel de la Barbie	Cártel Independiente de Acapulco	La Mano con Ojos
			Cártel del Charro	La Nueva Administración
Cártel de Juárez	Cártel de Juárez	Cártel de Juárez	Cártel de Juárez	Cártel Independiente de Acapulco
Cártel de Tijuana	Cártel de Tijuana	Cártel de Tijuana	Cártel de Tijuana	Cártel del Charro
	Facción de El Teo	Facción de El Teo		Cártel de Juárez
Cártel del Golfo	Cártel del Golfo-Zetas	Cártel del Golfo Los Zetas	Cártel del Golfo Los Zetas	Cártel del Golfo Los Zetas
La Familia Michoacana	La Familia Michoacana	La Familia Michoacana	La Familia Michoacana	Los Caballeros Templarios
				Los Incorregibles
			La Resistencia	La Empresa
Cártel del Milenio	Cártel del Milenio	Cártel del Milenio	Cártel de Jalisco-Nueva Generación	La Resistencia
				Cártel de Jalisco-Nueva Generación
-	-	-	-	La Nueva Federación para Vivir Mejor
6	8	10	11	16

On the one hand, there are the traditional, powerful cartels that have continued to hang on for dear life, such as the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels. Then there are the new, even more violent cartels, like the Knights Templar, which emerged from the wreckage of La Familia Michoacana and went on to become one of the most sadistic cartels in Mexico. And finally, though not shown in this graph, there are allegedly smaller gangs like those that emerged from the wreckage of the Gulf Cartel in Tamaulipas, where constant targeting and fragmentation presumably resulted in smaller, decentralized gangs that are now to blame mostly for petty crime rather than the much more worrisome string of kidnappings and murder that occurred a mere five years ago.⁸⁹ High level government officials in fact assert that what remains in Mexico are simple skirmishes, or battles between cartels to assert control; high-impact homicides, they say, are a thing of the past.

⁸⁹ Lee Cotton and Cassy Dorff, “Mapping the Network Effects of a Militarized Policy in Mexico,” *Political Violence @ a Glance*, December 8, 2015, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2015/12/08/mapping-the-network-effects-of-a-militarized-policy-in-mexico/>.

Tomas Zeron, Mexico's director of Mexico's top criminal investigation agency, went so far as to assert that all that is left in Mexico now are two major cartels; the rest, are just gangs⁹⁰ While such broad and optimistic government statements are certainly suspect, they are in line with the general idea that violence today is now more the product of intra-gang warfare, rather than massive cartel upheaval.

To further complicate the fact that there are now all of these different organizations with differing levels of power causing turmoil, there is also the added problem that the traditional drug trade, as well as the violence associated with it, has morphed into something completely new, thanks to the constant fighting and targeting. Here is the thing about targeting blood-thirsty, powerful, absurdly rich members of cartels that have reached the cusp of power through violence and intimidation tactics: they do not particularly like being challenged. And they are definitely not going down without a fight. Targeting the cartels, limiting their resources, and going after their assets has weakened them, but has also prompted them to look for alternative ways to enhance their business; hence the diversification of violence. The fragmentation, or "balkanization," of the major crime groups has been accompanied by diversification by many of the groups into other types of criminal activity."⁹¹

A proposed means of countering this is to stop the militarized approach and focus instead on addressing drug demand. As Mark Kleiman points out, "the basic problem is not supply from Mexico but demand from the United States, and (...) it is incumbent on the United States to reduce the quantities of illicit drugs its residents sell, buy, and consume," he therefore asserts that

⁹⁰ Rafael Croda, "'En México Sólo Quedan Dos Cáteles... El de Sinaloa Y El CJNG: Tomás Zerón,'" *Proceso*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/407056/en-mexico-solo-quedan-dos-carteles-el-de-sinaloa-y-el-cjng-tomas-zeron>.

⁹¹ Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations." Pg. 9

“if cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, and cannabis were handled in the United States the way alcohol is handled (...) if they were available for sale across the counter in unlimited quantities to any adult, subject only to modest taxes—the illicit markets would disappear and so would their contribution to violence in Mexico.”⁹² This, is, however, an incredibly simplistic argument. Suggesting that legalizing drugs in the United States will reduce violence in Mexico dangerously overlooks the fact that extortion has become an independent source of revenue for cartels, and may even be as lucrative as drug trafficking. Gangs and cartels have blackmailed Mexican civilians, farmers, and politicians for hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years. This makes legalizing drug use a decidedly ineffective method of combatting cartel violence. What most proponents of legalization simply do not realize is that the problem has almost nothing to do with drug-trafficking at this point. We are dealing with a massive, diversified mafia. You take away drug-related profits, and cartels will try to make up for those profits by kidnapping and extorting twice as many people. In an article written for *The Guardian*, Jo Tuckman describes the chilling grip that the narcos already have over many areas of the country:

Calderón has consistently argued that taking the war to the cartels was the only way to stop Mexico becoming a "narco-state," but in this part of the country (*Tierra de Fuego*, Michoacan), the *caballeros* have already taken control of areas of everyday life that have nothing to do with the production or shipment of drugs. Locals say the cartel decides when the mango or lemon harvest should start, according to its reading of market trends. Farmers who cannot wait for the best prices must sell their fruit in secret, at considerable personal risk. The *caballeros* are also said to have become the preferred option for sorting out disputes among members of the community, ranging from the disagreements over boundary fences to unpaid debts or a violent husband. One witness describes how a cartel representative courteously welcomes disputing parties into his office and delivers his judgment without so much as a hint of a threat. "There is no need for that," the witness says. "Everybody knows what could happen."⁹³

⁹² Kleiman, "Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars."

⁹³ Jo Tuckman, "Mexico Drug War Continues to Rage in Region Where President Fired First Salvo," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/30/mexico-drug-war-tierra-caliente-calderon>.

Tampico is, once again, an excellent example of this diversification. From 2008 onwards, rumors started up that any new businesses that started propping up were tied to the drug trade, and any that failed supposedly did so because they had refused to pay up for their “derecho de piso.” Once police raids and turf wars endangered the cartels’ assets, they made up for this loss in income by demanding payments from the local citizenry in order to ensure “protection” for their business. The pay-up often ranged in the thousands of pesos, and any business owners that refused to comply faced dire consequences. In 2008, the owners of Conni Pizzerias, a successful Tampico-based franchise that had operated for over twenty years, were forced to flee the city after repeated threats on their life when they refused to give in and pay up. In 2014, amid a brief flare-up in violence, the Lavins, a family that had been around for generations and owned several successful restaurants, moved to Texas, after cartel members had shot at and burned down their restaurants, presumably because they had refused to pay up as well. When my brother’s business was targeted by the Gulf Cartel, its members did not only ask for money, they also wanted my brother and his business partners to work for them. The next day, the four partners packed their bags, unable to face the situation any more. I know more people who have been kidnapped than I can count. It is, in fact, a rarity to meet someone from my city who has *not* been subject to some atrocity or another. The sheer magnitude and array of crimes over the past few years make one thing clear: this long ago ceased to be a simple matter of drug trafficking.

These accounts are chilling, and prove how pervasive the reach of the cartels truly is in some areas of Mexico. Because of this, some may, of course, be tempted to argue: so what if violence as a notion has become complicated? It does not matter what the sources and motives of violence are, what matters is that violence is happening as a result of this policy. And this is a

perfectly valid argument. In the end, national security and public safety are inextricably linked, and Mexico can, in some ways, be seen as renegeing from its duty as a State to protect its citizens. There have been frequent claims that this makes Mexico a failed state.⁹⁴ If Mexico is unable to guarantee safety for its citizens, why should the diversification of the violence itself matter?

But, here is what it comes down to: violence has different degrees. And this matters for the government and our understanding of the situation because of a simple question. Is it better to have giant, all-powerful cartels that have absolute and complete impunity that the government cannot fight against or defend itself from, or smaller little gangs increasing violence and wreaking havoc that the government can actually stand up to? In the end, it's a catch 22: decapitation leads to a larger number of smaller cartels which in turn increases violence, but the advantage of this is that the government can suddenly defy cartel rule. No matter what, the options are suboptimal, so a hard decision has to be made.

Unreliable data

Finally, we cannot rely on violence as a measure of progress in the Drug War because, to put it succinctly, numbers associated with violence are markedly unreliable, making any advances, or setback, incredibly hard to assess.

As a recent U.S. Congressional Report has admitted:

The scope of the violence generated by Mexican crime groups has been difficult to measure due to restricted reporting by the government and attempts by crime groups to mislead the public. The criminal actors either publicize their crimes in garish displays intended to intimidate their rivals, the public, or security forces. They may also attempt to

⁹⁴ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Watch Out, America: Mexico May Be the Next Failed State," *Cato Institute*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/watch-out-america-mexico-may-be-next-failed-state>.

attribute their crimes to other actors, such as a competing cartel, or they cover up the homicides they commit. For example, some shootouts are simply not reported as a result of media self-censorship or because the bodies disappear.⁹⁵

Numerous assessments have recognized that when it comes to data on homicides and other measures of criminality, violence has been significantly underreported everywhere in Mexico.⁹⁶ And if numbers and reports cannot be trusted, how are we supposed to figure out whether the situation is improving or worsening?

⁹⁵ Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations.”

⁹⁶ Diana Villiers Negro Ponte, “The Merida Initiative and Central America: The Challenges of Containing Public Insecurity and Criminal Violence” (Foreign Policy at Brookings, May 2009).

Thesis Chapter 6: Case Study Tampico

Introduction

This all brings me to the subject of my case study; a particularly sensitive topic for me, given that it involves my hometown: Tampico, Tamaulipas. I chose this city as a case study for simple reason. My intimate familiarity with the city, as well as my access to both public opinion surveys and interviews with government officials has allowed me to approach this subject from an unusual position. I have, simply put, a unique level of access that goes beyond the academic, and beyond the numbers. This is particularly helpful because of the problem I have established in the previous pages: data is simply so unreliable in the majority of Mexico, that we need to take a different, non-traditional approach if we are to get a true sense of the situation. Because of this, I chose unique markers of success for my study, such as interviews, school enrollment numbers, and newspaper reports.

Tampico is the southernmost city in the state of Tamaulipas. While only the fifth-largest city in the state (with a population of roughly 300,000 people) it is also the Huasteca region's largest cultural and services center, and Mexico's second largest and most important port. Its metropolitan area serves around 859,419 inhabitants. Several of the most productive oil fields in Mexico (including the Ebano, Pánuco, Huasteca, and Tuxpan) are situated within a 100-mile (160-km) radius of the city.⁹⁷ Like many Mexican cities that are unlucky enough to be nestled close to the U.S. border, Tampico has in recent years gone through a tumultuous and bloody war, characterized by shootouts, kidnappings, and terror. Shortly after President Felipe Calderón first announced, in 2006, his plan to tackle the cartels, chaos exploded. The once peaceful and fast-

⁹⁷ "Tampico | Mexico," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/place/Tampico-Mexico>.

growing city ensconced in the Gulf of Mexico lost its former sense of safety, and as violence became the norm, rather than the exception, it saw its citizens flee in droves. After a while, “For Sale” signs began cropping up by the dozens, and the streets became effectively empty as soon as the sun went down; an unofficial, self-imposed curfew.

The fast deterioration of security conditions in Tampico is particularly striking given that, before the beginning of the drug war, Tampico, and Tamaulipas as a whole, were known for having among the lowest crime rates in Mexico. Before 2004, the rate of homicides per every 100,000 inhabitants in Tamaulipas was well below the national average; and significantly below the average for a border state. By 2008 this number spiked; by 2010 it surpassed the national average, and by 2012 it reached an all-time high of 45.65 homicides per every 100,000 inhabitants, officially placing Tamaulipas at the forefront of homicides amongst the border states. People started fleeing the state in droves. It is estimated that, between 2009 and 2014, a total of 41,000 citizens of Tamaulipas moved to safer areas of Mexico and the United States, specifically with the motive of escaping the climate of violence. This number accounts for 27.1% of total migration out of Tamaulipas, making this the state with the largest amount safety-motivated migration in the country. Chaos, bloodshed and disarray were the norm.

Around mid-2014, however, the narrative started changing. The interviews that I will expand on further in this chapter reveal a newfound trust in the government, and increased levels of traceable government activity in the region. Furthermore, I collected that shows increased migration back into the state: an analysis of the enrollment numbers for The American School of Tampico shows an increase in enrollment starting around this time, further implying increased migration *back into* the city. This narrative of increased security, however, does not match up

with violence-related data, which shows fairly stable levels of violence, murder and kidnappings, with only a very slight reduction in recent years.

This is perplexing because the interviews I collected imply a greatly improved situation in recent years. In other words, the quantitative data is not matching the qualitative data I collected, because the numbers are not matching up to the witness accounts. While qualitative data reveals, overall, that violence and public wariness have gone down significantly over the past few years. Quantitative data, however, would imply that this descent has actually been relatively small.

While the reason behind this is subject to debate, I contend that this is a positive development, and implies that the government strategy has in fact been working. Because violence-related data in Mexico (and particularly in more conflict-ridden areas such as Tamaulipas) is notoriously unreliable⁹⁸ we must by default assume that any numbers that depend on citizens reporting crimes must be taken with a grain of salt.

Methodology

My role as a researcher

As a native of Mexico, I possess first-hand knowledge of the Drug War, and am privileged in being privy to information that a non-native would not be able to easily obtain. In carrying out my research, this proved simultaneously an advantage as well as a problem. Because

⁹⁸ Jason Breslow, "The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War," *FRONTLINE*, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/>.

of my knowledge of the area, native fluency in the language, as well as ample network of connections, I was able to conduct thorough research and question high-level officials that most scholars would not have had access to. At the same time, however, my previous knowledge of the Drug War, and the way in which it has personally affected myself and my family meant that I came into the research with preconceived notions and deeply held beliefs. While I tried to approach my research in as open and honest a way as possible, I must acknowledge this bias. I was also forced to be very careful in the way in which I conducted interviews. Because some of the people that I chose to interview were either friends or acquaintances, I had to be very careful to maintain a professional distance, and attempt to remain objective during interviews.

Qualitative and Quantitative fieldwork:

My qualitative research consisted primarily of one-on-one interviews. I conducted the bulk of these interviews during the month of January, while on winter break in Tampico. After receiving a grant from the Political Science Department, I was able to fly back in the month of March, in order to finish gathering my data.

I utilized a non-random sample, selecting most of my interviewees through a network of personal connections, often asking friends of friends to refer me. While I initially attempted to standardize my interviews through a questionnaire, it soon became clear that this drastically limited the scope and quality of data that I was able to gather particularly given the rather different backgrounds of each interviewee. I decided, in turn, to tailor my questions to each one, and allow the interviewee to elaborate on anything they thought important. All in all, I conducted

8 hour-long interviews with a selection of government officials and public service workers. I recorded each of these interviews.

While my method of selecting interviewees poses some problems, such as a narrow sample with the potential for bias, I chose this approach for a number of reasons. First of all, this design allowed me to gather reasonably diverse perspectives. I consciously interviewed students, former government officials, bankers, and business owners, and was able to approach them because of previous network connections. Most importantly, due to the sensitivity and volatility of the security situation in Tampico, I chose this approach because it limited danger to myself, my family, and any of those interviewed. While a randomized sample might have allowed for broader and more socioeconomically diverse perspectives, it also would have required myself and others to undertake excessive security risks.

I then complemented this qualitative research with numerical data compiled from the American School of Tampico, one of the largest schools in Tampico, serving Kindergarten through High School. This is, notably, my former alma mater, which enabled me to get in touch with an old acquaintance and acquire the official enrollment numbers for the past seven years. The numbers show a marked decrease in enrollment starting in 2010, followed by a moderate increase around 2013- coinciding with the perceived decrease in drug-related violence, which corresponds to the expectations that I had based on the qualitative research I conducted. In this way, the numbers add an important dimension to my thesis.

Methodological Limitations

The primary obstacle that I faced in the course of my research was the extremely sensitive and potentially dangerous nature of the data. Accordingly, I had to be extremely cautious in conducting my interviews and general assessments. While I had initially intended to send out a survey directed towards the students of the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas (UAT), the largest university in the state, a friend of mine who studies there warned me that several of the faculty members are infamous for housing many students who double as the cartels' henchmen. Sending out randomized surveys of this sort would therefore be far too risky. The sheer danger associated with this topic meant that I was forced to be extremely careful in my approach and that I faced challenges in convincing some of my interviewees to speak with me.

There are, of course, several methodological limitations to my data, the most significant of which are those that result from my non-randomized sample. Because I was forced to rely on personal connections in order to contact interviewees, much of my research is confined to upper class experiences. The students I interviewed were well-off, the governmental officials I spoke with are part of the elite, and the school whose enrollment numbers I acquired educates primarily wealthy students. While I would have enjoyed access to a more diverse sample, and while I know that my research would have been better for it, ultimately, I am confident that the data I have obtained depict the development of the security situation in Tampico fairly accurately, as my data is largely in agreement with newspaper and anecdotal data that I include in this chapter.

A further limitation with my case study is the difficulty in assessing public figures' motivations. The decline of public service could be ascribed to rampant corruption, however, corruption has been endemic to Mexico and particularly Tamaulipas, for decades; and this degree of neglect is unprecedented. This suggests that there must be another factor, such as the complete

lack of governmental presence that was enabled and caused by the menacing power of the cartels.

Case Study

Background of Tampico-Specific Cartel Conflict: The Gulf Cartel vs Los Zetas

In addition to being my hometown, Tampico, is a uniquely interesting case study because of the cartels that operate within it, and the complex turf war that has raged within it for years. Originally, Tampico, or rather, the state of Tamaulipas, was home to the Gulf Cartel, one of the oldest and most powerful of Mexico's criminal groups.⁹⁹ Though founded by Juan Nepomuceno Guerra and Juan Garcia Abrego in the 1980s, the cartel and its leadership rose to national prominence in the 90s, under the command of Osiel "The Friend Killer" Cardenas Guillen.¹⁰⁰ Notorious for his backstabbing ways (hence the nickname), his paranoia, and his conviction that everyone was out to get him, Osiel Cardenas dedicated much of his time and effort towards recruiting hitmen to serve as his and the cartels' personal army. After approaching former Lt. Antonio Javier Quevedo Guerrero, demanding to get the "best men possible," he was told that those men could only be found in the army. As a result, "the Gulf cartel sought out to recruit veritable heretics-- members of the Army's elite Airborne Special Forces Groups, or GAFES," the cream of the crop of Mexican intelligence and security training.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ InSight Crime, "Gulf Cartel," accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/gulf-cartel-profile>.

¹⁰⁰ Grayson, *Mexico*. Pg. 180-182

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Pg. 180

For years, these military deserters, who called themselves Los Zetas, served as the Gulf Cartel's armed branch, conducting its dirty work and employing innovatively violent methods to reach their goals. As Osiel Cardenas consolidated his position within the Gulf Cartel, he expanded the Zetas' responsibilities, tasking them with "collecting debts, securing his *plazas* (turf) for cocaine supply and trafficking routes, discourage defections from the cartel, and execute - often with brutal savagery - his foes".¹⁰²

The arrest and subsequent extradition to the United States of Cardenas Guillen in 2003, however, changed the panorama for Los Zetas. After losing their chief, Los Zetas strategically began collecting taxes at an accelerated rate, and expanded their reach in the area. Emboldened both by their growing success as well as the loss of the Gulf Cartel's chief, Los Zetas--led by Heriberto "El Lazca" Lazcano--began to act independently, leading to internal turmoil and amplified violence. In the words of a U.S. law enforcement official "The Gulf Cartel created the lion, but now the lion has wised up and controls the handler."¹⁰³ By mid 2010, the Zetas officially broke off from the Gulf Cartel. Once separated from the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas became one of the most violent and feared cartels in the region, and unleashed a bloody inter-cartel fight for resources.¹⁰⁴

The collision of this inter-cartel rivalry, the government's aggressive military strategy, as well as the Zetas' unprecedentedly violent methods, led to an increasingly volatile and dangerous situation across the state of Tamaulipas. As the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas sought to each establish their dominance over the other, a "shadow state" of sorts was created: two cartels asserting their

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Pg. 181, qt anonymous source

¹⁰⁴ George Grayson, "The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an Instrument of Cartel Warfare" (United States Army War College Press, April 2014).

dominance over each other, and over the government. This bloody rivalry and power struggle in turn deeply affected the government’s ability to assert itself, and Tamaulipas became a state dominated by its cartel presence.

The Numbers

While most of the country saw an overall rise in homicides following the start of the drug war, Tamaulipas, and particularly its biggest port, were disproportionately affected. The full extent of the damage is better appreciated in this chart¹⁰⁵, translated from an original chart compiled by Latin American newspaper, “El Universal” using data from the SESNSP (the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System), which shows the Average Number of Violence-Related Inquiries in Tamaulipas from 2005 to 2015:

Average Monthly Reporting					Variation In Reports By %			
Year	Homicide	Kidnapping	Extortion	Violent Robbery	Homicide	Kidnapping	Extortion	Violent Robbery
2005-2009	26.07	1.95	5.55	204.32				
2010	60.08	3.92	8.92	420.25	130.5	100.85	60.66	105.69
2011	71.25	10.75	13.08	685.92	18.59	174.47	46.73	63.22

¹⁰⁵ Oscar Rodriguez Chavez, “Infografía de La Violencia En Tamaulipas Y La Migración Por Inseguridad,” *El Universal*, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/blogs/observatorio-nacional-ciudadano/2015/10/23/infografia-de-la-violencia-en-tamaulipas-y-la>. Own Translation.

2012	84.67	10.25	12.83	642.58	18.83	-4.65	-1.91	-6.32
2013	46.33	16.33	18.75	520.00	-45.28	59.35	46.10	-19.08
2014	52.33	21.83	15.75	435.92	12.95	33.67	-16.00	-16.17
2015	47.67	19.00	15.78	491.89	-8.92	-12.98	0.18	12.84

According to these numbers, violence remains relatively high; the situation in the state of Tamaulipas has improved only ever so slightly over the past couple of years, if at all. The numbers show a mixed picture because the different types of violence are changing over given periods. While during some years, violence in some areas goes down, it increases in other areas, and vice versa, thereby painting an inaccurate and misleading picture. 2005-2009 shows relatively low, very stable levels of violence across the fields of: “Homicide,” “Kidnappings,” “Extortion”, and “Violent Robbery,” which all suddenly spike tremendously in 2010. Between 2009 and 2010, the number of homicides increases by **130.5%**. Kidnappings and extortion rates trail just slightly behind at around a 100% increase, while kidnappings go up 60%. In 2011, the violence continues to rise with kidnappings going up an additional **174.47%**. There is no decline in overall levels of violence until 2012, but this is coupled with a more dramatic increase in kidnappings. And while in 2013 the number of homicides goes down by 45%, this is matched with a dramatic doubling in reports of both kidnapping and extortion. The most recent available data, for the year 2015, still shows an odd variation in levels of violence. While the number of reported homicides and kidnappings has gone down from the previous year, violent robbery has increased. Overall, the numbers remain significantly higher than they were between 2005-2009. While the graph does show a slight decrease in overall violence in the most recent two years, this

variation is not enough to explain the changing attitudes and sense of security expressed by the citizens and officials in the following interviews.

Furthermore, data produced by the National Survey for Victimization and Perception of Public Security (ENVIPE), administered by Mexico's largest Statistics Center, the INEGI, reveals a discouraging picture. In 2011, the survey revealed that 83.4% of people ages 18 and up in Tamaulipas felt unsafe in their state¹⁰⁶, whereas by 2015, this number had gone up to 86.9%.¹⁰⁷ This is particularly perplexing given that these numbers are intended to measure local *perceptions* of insecurity. According to these numbers, citizens now feel more unsafe than they did four years ago, which directly contradicts my own research.

When considering citizens' responses and upon analyzing the situation more holistically, we realize that these numbers make no real sense. Every interview I conducted, every independent observation that I have made, as well as every piece of independent data that have I gathered over the past year, points to the exact same thing, that people from Tamaulipas, and particularly Tampico, "feel" safer now than they did at the beginning of the cartels' split. This contradiction is perplexing, but, nonetheless, the reality is that in the past two years that I have visited Tampico and surrounding cities, *major* changes have occurred. For instance, when I went home during Christmas 2015, for the first time in years, my parents allowed me to walk my dog in the park. I was able to do so without having to look over my shoulder at every moment. New

¹⁰⁶ "Encuesta Nacional de Victimización Y Percepción Sobre Seguridad Pública 2011 (ENVIPE)," *INEGI*, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/regulares/envipe/envipe2011/default.aspx>.

¹⁰⁷ "Encuesta Nacional de Victimización Y Percepción Sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE) 2015," *INEGI*, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/regulares/envipe/envipe2015/default.aspx>.

restaurants lined the city's streets, flashy, brand new government buildings abounded, and public services, such as trash collection and street paving, were miraculously once again available.

Unfortunately, such anecdotal evidence does not lend itself well to quantitative analysis. So how can we prove it? This is where the bulk of my independent research comes in.

Benchmark: A Global Assessment of Tampico between 2009-2013

In order to fully understand the development of the drug war, as well as to analyze its progress in Tampico, it is first necessary to establish a benchmark, to paint a picture, so to speak, of the situation at the outbreak of the war. I truly realized, for the first time, that things in Tampico had taken a turn for the worse when I had a gun held up against my temple, as a tall, lanky man with a thick mustache shouted at me to hand over my keys. This happened midway through 2009 and truly, I should have seen it coming earlier. For months, people had taken to Twitter and Facebook and every possible social media outlet to warn each other of the constant shootings, the kidnappings, and the constant threats of violence.

Shortly thereafter, we reached the bloodiest, most horrifying part of the war. In 2010, all hell broke loose. The mayor's absenteeism started becoming all too apparent. Elected in 2008 to serve a three-year term, Oscar Perez Inguanzo was infamous for being particularly elusive during Tampico's hardest moments, effectively rendering the city without a leader to stand up to the cartels. As was reported in *Hora Cero's* scathing critique of his governance,

shortly after assuming his duties as municipal leader, critiques towards his administration were plentiful (...) it became apparent that public officers as well as the mayor himself were constantly absent, in clear violation of Article 55 of the Municipal code, which

stipulates that no public officer may be absent from his or her duties for more than 5 days without asking for the proper license.¹⁰⁸

The exact reason for this glaring absence is of course, speculative, but the general consensus in the city is that this absenteeism was the product of a mixture of fear of the cartels and a desire to escape close scrutiny. This same mayor would, after all, years later, be charged with embezzlement, and corruption.¹⁰⁹ Eventually, he was convicted for his crimes, only to be released shortly afterwards.¹¹⁰ This means that in our contemporary era, in a country that strives to present itself as a modern and progressive developing power, there was a major city and industrial center that operated without its head of government for a whole government cycle. This translated into failing public services and increasingly low public morale and decreased trust in the government.

Around the time that this this was happening in Tampico, the state of Tamaulipas was thrown into complete and absolute turmoil, as the PRI party's candidate to the governorship, Rodolfo Torre Cantu, was assassinated while on election tour, presumably by the then-leader of the Gulf Cartel, "El Coss."¹¹¹ His brother, Egidio Torre Cantu, a civil engineer, replaced him on the ballot, and eventually won the governorship.¹¹² Throughout his six-year governorship (2011-

¹⁰⁸ Jose Manuel Meza, "El 'paraíso Texano' de Los Pérez Inguanzo," *Horacerotam.com*, September 13, 2011, <http://horacerotam.com/internacional/el-paraiso-texano-de-los-perez-inguanzo/>.

¹⁰⁹ "Rinde OPI Su Declaración Ante El Juez," News Website, *El Sol de Tampico*, (November 15, 2011), <http://www.oem.com.mx/elsoldetampico/notas/n2309461.htm>.

¹¹⁰ Sandra Sosa, "Juez Libera a Pérez Inguanzo de Delitos," *Milenio*, accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.milenio.com/politica/Oscar_Perez_Inguanzo-ayuntamiento_de_Tampico-alcaldede_detenido_0_325767518.html.

¹¹¹ "El Coss' Mandó Matar a Candidato Del PRI: PGR," *Animal Político*, September 20, 2012, <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2012/09/el-coss-ordeno-el-asesinato-de-rodolfo-torre-cantu-pgr/>.

¹¹² Guadalupe Fuentes Lopez, "¿Quién Governa En Tamaulipas? El Priista Egidio Torre Cumple Cinco Años 'desaparecido,'" December 13, 2015, <http://www.sinembargo.mx/13-12-2015/1574841>.

2016), Torre Cantu has appeared to emulate former mayor Oscar Perez, by being predominantly absent from the national and statewide conversation regarding the drug violence.¹¹³ A former municipal officer who worked in the administration that immediately followed Oscar Perez', Magdalena Peraza's administration,¹¹⁴ described Torre Cantu's performance as follows:

Egidio... and the Tamaulipas state government in general... they were and still are and always have been completely inefficient. During my time in the administration I personally helped orchestrate many projects in which we sought to educate people through sports and culture... and there were all these initiatives through which we sought to curtail the power of the narco. Every initiative that "la maestra"¹¹⁵ and us put forward... it was all in collaboration with the Federal government. The state government did nothing... in fact I think if anything they stopped us from doing more. I wouldn't trust a single man at the state level.

The physical absence of the government was felt in many substantive ways. The government began failing to perform, for instance, its basic duty of providing public services to its citizenry. In January of 2011, Maria de Lourdes Perez Reyes, municipal treasurer, announced that the city of Tampico still owed money to *Medio Ambientales del Golfo*, a waste-collection agency, as well as to the *Hospital Carlos Canseco* for services rendered during the Perez administration.¹¹⁶

The government also failed to provide security and safety to its people. Numerous news outlets and the citizens of Tampico began to refer to the city as a "ghost town,"¹¹⁷ as more and more houses were abandoned, and shootings in the street became an everyday occurrence. The Wall Street Journal even reported how:

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Name Ommitted for Security Reasons, Interview over Skype, Name Ommitted, Skype, February 23, 2016.

¹¹⁵ This official worked from 2011-2013, under the administration of Magdalena Peralta, nicknamed "la maestra" because she was a teacher before running for mayor.

¹¹⁶ Meza, "El 'paraíso Texano' de Los Pérez Inguanzo."

¹¹⁷ Tracy Wilkinson, "In Mexico, Tamaulipas State Residents Rise up against Cartel Violence," *Latimes.com*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-tampico-20140619-story.html>.

Across Tamaulipas, gunmen run their own checkpoints on highways. The cartels have forced Mexico's national oil company to abandon several gas fields. Many farmers have given up on tons of soybeans and sorghum in fields controlled by criminals. Leading families, fleeing extortion and threats of kidnapping, have escaped to Texas—as have the mayors of the state's three largest cities.¹¹⁸

Tampico, Tamaulipas was, in other words, the ultimate warning: a cautionary tale of what happens when cartels are left to grow unchecked. At one point, it was rumored that 90% of the state belonged to the cartels; that is to say, the cartels functioned as a shadow government in most local governments. This meant that no one went out anymore. I recall there being days at a time during which my friends and I were unable to go to school, for fear of the shootings taking place outside. I do not think I saw a single police officer for a couple of years, and if I did, I reacted with fear, knowing that, in all likelihood, that police officer was colluding with the cartels.

The lack of safety and the government's failure to provide essential state functions led, in turn, to a city and state-wide economic downturn. Economic and structural development stopped almost completely. The streets were dark at night, and buildings started quite literally falling apart.¹¹⁹ The economy plummeted. During the Perez administration, business and tourist sectors declined by 15%. Car sales fell by 10%.¹²⁰

The dire situation lent credence to numerous assertions from U.S. officials that Mexico should be monitored by the U.S. government as a “weak and failing” State that could crumble under cartel assault.¹²¹ I oppose this characterization: while certain states may be failing, this does not translate to an entire nation in jeopardy. The Mexican federal government is fairly

¹¹⁸ Nicholas Casey And José de Córdoba, “Northern Mexico’s State of Anarchy,” *WSJ*, accessed April 22, 2016,

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704104104575622840256881122>.

¹¹⁹ Meza, “El ‘paraíso Texano’ de Los Pérez Inguanzo.”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Galen Carpenter, “Watch Out, America.”

robust and is able to provide areas more strongly under its control (eg, more central areas of Mexico, and particularly Mexico City) with higher levels of protection and public services.¹²² However, the same cannot be said of the dire situation in the northern areas of the country, where the government is ineffectual. A distinction must be made between Mexico as a whole, and the more threatened, Narco-controlled border states, such as Tamaulipas. While most Mexican officials have adamantly refused to label Tamaulipas as a failed state, it is most certainly not a fully functioning one even today, and in 2010, it could well be characterized as largely failing.

Tampico Now: A Qualitative Assessment of Tampico Since 2013

Today, Tampico is far from peaceful. There are still occasional shootings in the streets,¹²³ and people still refrain from venturing out alone at night. But the past two years have produced an almost palpable sense of relief among the populace, as evidenced by my own experiences, and as reflected in the interviews I conducted. It is a great relief that the situation is no longer hopeless, and that there is once again a visible government in place, and in turn, some semblance of safety.

The first and most important sign of resumed governmental efficacy is the fact that the government has resumed the fulfilment of its constitutional duty to provide public services. Since 2011, when Magdalena Peraza (alias *la maestra*) of the PAN party, overtook the PRI's candidate in the elections, government services began to be reinstated. In an interview with Pedro Luis

¹²² Canales, Interview/Minister Canales/Summer2015.

¹²³ "Shootings in Altamira and Tampico Leave 5 Dead," *Daily Black Gold*, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://oronegro.mx/2015/04/22/balaceras-en-altamira-y-tampico-dejan-5-muertos/>.

Moreno, former Chargee of Sports and Recreational Affairs in Tampico during Peraza's administration, he explained how:

The administration really focused on providing recreational and cultural services for the citizens of Tampico, particularly given how poor a state the city was in at the time we started working. We actually managed to procure some federal funding, and in doing so really tried to improve the state of the arts in the city. The administration was really working with the idea that in order to prevent the situation from worsening, and more people from joining the cartels, we really wanted to push for a cultural renaissance, and in some ways educate young people through these services.¹²⁴

The government's newfound ability to not only offer the most basic public services but also to provide more leisurely cultural activities further illustrates its slow reclamation of power. In recent years, government offices have been erected by the dozen.¹²⁵ The current mayor, who resides within the city, has pushed through several education reforms and regularly makes public appearances.¹²⁶ Houses are now occupied, and parks are now well-lit and are frequented by joggers; this is tangible evidence of public services being performed. As notable resident and businessman, Eduardo Manzur asserts "Now, business is almost back to how it used to be. You can *feel* the peacefulness and there is no longer fear of something bad happening if you lower your guard for one second."¹²⁷

A second positive sign for the city's improving governance is the state government's ability to impose fiscal regulations that target the cartels. A notable sign of increased government regulation in Tampico and Tamaulipas as a whole is the new, strict governmentally-ordered and bank-executed campaign against money laundering. In an interview that I conducted with Luis Fernandez, a financial executive at HSBC Tampico headquarters, he explained how:

¹²⁴ Pedro Luis Moreno, Interview with Chargee of Sports in Tampico, Phone, February 19, 2016.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ "Trabajamos Para Fortalecer La Educación de Calidad En Tampico: Alcalde | Tamaulipas En Línea," March 21, 2016, <http://tamaulipasenlinea.mx/trabajamos-para-fortalecer-la-educacion-de-calidad-en-tampico-alcalde/>.

¹²⁷ Eduardo Manzur, Interview with Business Owner/Treasurer, March 9, 2016.

Even as little as two years ago, we had very little regulation, particularly in the smaller cities like this one (Tampico). Anyone could come in and open an account and transfer money and make all sorts of big transactions without a fuss. Now, everything gets monitored by headquarters in Mexico City, and clients need to be able to explain how they got their money. The other day this girl who I've known for a long time... she came in with a bunch of money, because she had sold some property she owned to her mother. Now, because it was her mother, she did not bother with any paperwork, and gave it to her for a very reduced price. But she came in with all this cash and no way to trace the money to a sales transaction. I know this girl and the mother, so I understood this was a genuine situation, but not even I can do anything. Now if you don't have a way to prove your income, the bank won't have anything to do with you. Especially HSBC- we were in hot water just a couple years ago and almost lost our license to operate in dollars, so now we're extra careful.¹²⁸

This kind of careful monitoring would have been unenforceable just a few years ago, when compliance on the part of bank officials would have been unlikely. Denying a drug lord access to banking would surely have resulted in a death sentence. That such regulations are now enforceable indicates the degree to which government presence has increased.

In addition to the banks, Tampico's local government has also begun implementing new and more stringent methods for tracing the movement of money, via the use of highly modern, electronic money-tracking systems. When I interviewed Eduardo Manzur, who is also chief of the state's financial office, he boasted about these new methods, asserting that "these new systems are the best of the best... (the local and state government) has only recently begun to implement this new technology, but there are promising results and it will most likely prove a dramatically useful tool against money laundering."¹²⁹ According to Manzur, this new system demonstrates, not only the government's commitment to combating DTOs, but also its slow reassertion of control over the cartels.

¹²⁸ Luis Fernandez, Interview with HSBC Rep, March 8, 2016.

¹²⁹ Manzur, Interview with Business Owner/Treasurer.

Finally, there is the data that I compiled, which showcases enrollment numbers at the American School of Tampico over a period of seven years.

ESCUELA AMERICANA DE TAMPICO A.C. COMPARATIVO DE ALUMNOS DEL CICLO 2009-2010 AL 2015-2016														
Mes	2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016	
	No.	%	No.	%INCREM.	No.	%INCREM.								
	ALUMNOS	INCREM.	ALUMNOS	INCREM.										
Agosto	1014	0.4%	815	-24%	705	-16%	724	2.62%	749	3.34%	827	9.43%	861	3.95%
Septiembre	1011	1%	816	-24%	704	-16%	725	3%	749	3%	828	10%	861	4%
Octubre	1010	2%	802	-26%	705	-14%	730	3%	748	2%	828	10%	861	4%
Noviembre	1010	2%	799	-26%	701	-14%	731	4%	748	2%	838	11%	861	3%
Diciembre	1010	2%	794	-27%	701	-13%	734	4%	748	2%	831	10%	859	3%
Enero	1010	3%	778	-30%	697	-12%	730	5%	761	4%	835	9%	862	3%
Febrero	1012	3%	771	-31%	699	-10%	731	4%	759	4%	835	9%	864	3%
Marzo	1012	3%	774	-31%	695	-11%	729	5%	760	4%	835	9%	865	3%
Abril	1012	3%	773	-31%	696	-11%	726	4%	762	5%	835	9%		
Mayo	1009	3%	771	-31%	697	-11%	731	5%	762	4%	835	9%		
Junio	1009	3%	771	-31%	697	-11%	731	5%	762	4%	835	9%		

This data¹³⁰ shows that between 2010 and 2011, the number of students enrolled dropped drastically, down by 31% in June, while in recent years, notably 2014-2015, the numbers have started once again going up. I argue that these numbers serve as a particularly good indicator of migration in and out of the city. In 2010, as public services declined and the cartels asserted their uncontested control over the state, a large amount of people migrated out of the city, hence the low enrollment numbers, and further proving the dismal situation that the city faced around 2010. However, in recent years, enrollment numbers have started going up again, reflecting the anecdotal evidence I have collected, which indicated a highly improved and safer situation, and

¹³⁰ Obtained through correspondence with Aracely Vega, of the American School of Tampico admissions office

therefore, higher numbers of people migrating into the city (or at the very least, not migrating out).

Conclusion

As I have repeatedly stated, the data that I collected is highly incongruent. Government statistics show a decreased level of trust in the government, as well as relatively high numbers of violence even now. Meanwhile, the anecdotal evidence that I have collected implies a much-improved situation. In other words, my data does not currently match up. However, rather than be discouraged by these results, I see further potential in them. It is highly probably that the increases in violence are the result of increased trust in the government. As people feel safer, they are more likely to report cases to the authorities.

While more in-depth research would have to be done in order to conclude this assessment, or further verify this hypothesis, I believe this is a doable undertaking that may have significant ramifications for future study of the Mexican Drug War and the government's decapitation strategy. An ideal case study would have greater access to data and a random sample of interviewees, from every socio-economic background.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Looking Towards the Future

As the Mexican Drug War rages on and enters its 10th year, it is important to recognize the areas where improvement is still needed, as well as acknowledge the significant progress that has been made. According to my assessments, there has been some marked progress in terms of the government's intended goal of recapturing the state. At the same time, violence, while slowly lowering, continues to be a problem that afflicts the citizens of Mexico, particularly in the Narco-ravaged northern states. In order to move forward from this point, it is essential to examine the current strategies, and also look into how to improve them.

In writing this thesis, I do not advocate for the indiscriminate use of the military, or seek in any way to imply that human life is any less valuable than the State's sovereignty. I am, first and foremost, a citizen of Mexico, that has witnessed firsthand the atrocities that can occur when the cartels are left unchecked, and proceed to wreak havoc. I do not seek to imply that the government should not even acknowledge its citizens, and instead devote all of its resources to hunting down the cartels and fragmenting them. What I argue is, instead, that this is a complex problem that necessitates pragmatic, cold-headed solutions. The cartels possess unimaginable, unrelenting power, and the only way to stand up to them is through a combination of long-term reforms and the current strategy, which seeks to dismantle them and make them more manageable.

In actuality, I agree with most of the common-sense arguments that scholars have suggested: relying on the military is not getting the job done.¹³¹ Mexico needs to continue implementing reforms; aggressive reforms that address the lax and ineffective judicial system. It needs to purge itself of corrupt police officers and corrupt public officials. It needs to rehaul its entire economy and provide opportunities so that young people have options other than going into the drug trade. These are all key to achieving a long-term, peaceful solution to the Mexican Drug War.

I differ only in one simple thing: I do not believe that any of these reforms are achievable without relying on the military forces to reassert State control over the country. Better cooperation between the branches of the government is needed, and the “control” part of the “fragment and control strategy” has to be better implemented; but ultimately the military is an imperfect solution to an incredibly complex and difficult problem. And it is only by coupling this imperfect solution with new, progressive reforms that any change will come about.

¹³¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Cuidado: The Inescapable Necessity of Better Law Enforcement in Mexico” (LSE Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy, 2016). See Also Guerrero, “Nexos”

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Appendix A

Interviews

This appendix provides further information on the persons interviewed in the course of my thesis research. While I initially intended to follow a standardized format and record structured interviews, it soon became apparent that the very nature of this research necessitated flexibility. Some participants, for instance, were much more forthcoming if left to elaborate and expand on their own. Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of this subject matter, participants were, for the most part, unwilling to be recorded. In this section I include relevant participant information and a summary of all relevant points discussed during the interview. Some names are omitted to protect the interviewee's safety.

Participants/Interviewees

Participant 1

Name omitted for security purposes.

Participant was a government official.

Interviewed: February 23, 2016

Interview was conducted over Skype and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Participant was contacted through an old high school acquaintance of the researcher. Participant was contacted through Whatsapp, an Internet texting service popular in Mexico, and well-known for being particularly difficult to intercept (by cartels). The researcher described the project to the participant and asked if the participant was able to provide any insight. The participant agreed to participate, on the condition that their name and specific position were not revealed. The interviewee worked in the Magdalena Peraza administration, in a high-power position dealing with cultural matters. He talked at length about the challenges that the Peraza administration faced in dealing with the state government. In particular, he expressed absolute distrust in the state government and condemned the governor. He assured me that any advances

made during the Peraza administration were the product of the local and federal governments' collaboration, and that the state government actively made any advances significantly harder to achieve.

Participant 2

Canales, Rodrigo (PhD)

Political Advisor to the Mexican Ambassador in the United States, 2014-2015

Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at MIT's Sloan School of Management

Researches the institutional implications of the Mexican war on drugs

Interviewed: July 14, 2015 in Washington, DC

The interview was conducted in Spanish. The interview was unstructured, intended to answer the overarching questions:

- 1) Is the current security strategy any different from the one employed by Calderon?
- 2) Why was decapitation employed as a method of fighting the cartels?

The minister wanted to speak at length and casually, and specifically requested to be interviewed over lunch because of this. The interview was therefore unrecorded. Due to the importance of Minister Canales' insight, I include a summary of his most important comments at the end of this section (see Appendix A-1).

Participant 3

Moreno, Pedro Luis

Chargee of Sports in Tampico, Tamps. 2011-2013

Interview conducted by phone from Boston; Feb. 19, 2016

Unstructured interview. The general topic of conversation included the general trend towards more cultural and educational investment on behalf of the Magdalena Peraza administration. The participant talked at length about his personal experience in dealing with and attempting to increase awareness of cultural programs in order to increase social values and thus reduce drug cartel membership. He believed that the situation has vastly improved in recent years and that, following cartel fragmentation, the government has become much more able to implement cultural programs and extend its reach. He based this assessment on both his own experience

within the government and his observance of increased government presence.

Participant 4

Gomez Braña Gonzalez, Daniela:

Tampico native; current student at University of Texas San Antonio

Interviewed: December 28, 2015 in Tampico, Tamaulipas.

Interview conducted in Spanish. I conducted a **semi-structured** interview, with a set of pre-planned questions, but gave the interviewee the chance to elaborate and asked subsequent questions as I saw fit. Questions included:

- 1) Please recount any instances of violence that affected you or your family in Tampico.
- 2) How did you cope with them and what did you do?
- 3) What is your general view of Tampico in 2010-2013?
- 4) What is your general view now?
- 5) Has your view changed significantly in the past few years?
- 6) If so, what do you think prompted this change?

While this was the format laid out for the interview, answers and subsequent questions varied substantially. The informal style of the interview allowed for free-flowing conversation. Daniela expressed a firm belief that the situation had gotten better in recent years, but that there was still much to be done. She mentioned how part of her motivation for studying in Texas was the sheer fear that she felt following her brush with corrupt transit officers, which I spoke about at length in the case study section of my thesis.

Participant 5

Fernandez, Luis

HSBC Executive, Tampico

Interview conducted in Tampico, Tamaulipas, at HSBC Tampico office on March 8, 2016

The interview was conducted very informally. I was able to get access to this executive because I was opening an account with the bank. I specifically mentioned the nature of this project, and received consent to include the participant's name and answers. In the interview he detailed the process for opening an account and providing proof of income within the new system. As a long-

time employee of HSBC, he was startled by the new security measures, and believed they denoted the new administration's willingness to tackle the cartels, as well as businesses' own efforts to do so. For instance, HSBC branches now require approval from the headquarters in Mexico City to open any new accounts, perform any major monetary transfers, etc. These branches have also become very strict about checking identification forms, etcetera.

Participant 6

Manzur, Eduardo

Chief of Finances of Tamaulipas State Office, 2015-2016

Business Owner: El Vagabundo Elegante

The participant believed, amongst other things, that the current crisis has been caused predominantly by society's moral decay, and that the solution ultimately lay in instilling further values on the community, as well as boosting the economy, thereby incentivizing the public against joining the cartels. He talked at length about the new money tracking measures that are being used by the federal, state and local governments, in order to fight money laundering. He believes that these measures have and will continue to strengthen governmental control and help fight drug trafficking.

Mr. Manzur also owns an old, well-established clothing shop in the city's old town; an area known for its confluence of people of all social classes. Speaking in his capacity as a business owner, he intimated that the situation has drastically improved since the bloodiest period of the drug war (2010-2013); excepting a brief flare-up in violence in 2014, which was followed by city-wide protests, he indicated that his business has improved substantially in the past two years. He also declared that the city just "feels" safer, and that he now is happy to walk around the streets at night alone. He asserted that his business partners and other small businessmen in the area have expressed a similar sentiment.

Participants 7 and 8

Lupita and Mari

Housemaids of an affluent Tampico family

Interview conducted in person, in the Tampico family house, on March 8, 2016. Further details and names omitted to protect the family and house workers.

Lupita and Mari were interviewed concurrently, and informally. The researcher was interested in getting a better sense of the security situation outside of the relatively wealthy interviewees that she had previously spoken with. Lupita and Mari expressed their belief that the situation was indeed improving, but ventured to say it was still very desperate, particularly for people of a lower socio economic status. Lupita had a cousin who, at the height of the war, was threatened by cartels and asked to join or die. She did not elaborate on the outcome. They both said they still feel particularly fearful when they cross the river into Panuco, the decidedly less affluent neighboring city in Veracruz, Tamaulipas, where many of their families live.

Appendix A-1

Notes on Interview with Minister Rodrigo Canales

This is a transcript of the notes I was able to take during the Interview with Minister Rodrigo Canales. They are informal, and convey his most important points.

Key points have been bolded by me for emphasis.

Minister Canales does not believe that the security strategy has changed at all, the difference is only in how much we talk about national security, and the narrative itself. During Calderon's six-year term, focus was shifted away from security, and the strategy began to be spoken about differently. However, it is at its core still the same.

These notes are extrapolated from Minister Rodrigo Canales' discussion of the current state of the Drug War. They are in the first-person, referring to Rodrigo Canales' opinions.

1) On The Use of the Military:

We can trace this (the drug war and current conflict) back all the way to the revolutionary period. You're dealing with coup d'etat after coup d'etat. What to do?

- **4 enforcement units are created not to provide public safety or protection against outside threats, but as a counterweight to each other**
 - *navy, military, federal police and Mexico City police* are all created so that no one army could act as a coup d'etat. they are kept totally separate from each other, and trained entirely with this goal in mind- counterweights. Federal police is smaller, because it is envisioned as the president's guard.
 - There is no emphasis on population control because Mexicans are inherently peaceful, there's never been a security problem, so **municipal forces become small, underfunded, and incapable of fighting the cartels.**
- **A system of accountability is created, but it is all done through political party controls.**
 - Not held accountable through laws, but through the power of the party, which is controlled by the president.
 - With the decentralization of presidential command, suddenly governors, mayors etc. aren't held accountable to anyone

So by the time the "narco" evolves into what it now is, there isn't really a police force to stop it, and local officials (mayors, governors, etc.) have no incentive to stop it. They are not held accountable because they no longer respond to party control (since Mexico has become democraticized) and they don't have enough men or money to staff the police forces.

Only option: the federal government steps in with the navy and marine forces, and eventually beefs up federal police. Mexico City never gets a substantial public security problem because it had the only local police force in Mexico that was staffed because it was produced as a counterweight to other federal institutions.

There is this quotation by Minister Ariel Moutsatsos that I like: “The basis of a powerful democratic state is a state with a giant police force that doesn’t need to use it”

In summation:

By the time the drug cartels really begin kicking in, there is no deterrent police force in Mexico and there are no longer any accountability checks at the local level. The Federal government is forced to step in and can only do so with its military forces. Military forces are not trained to safeguard public safety; they are **trained to eliminate threats to the State**.

2. On the Decapitation Strategy:

Was decapitation as a strategy effective?

In order to be able to answer and understand these questions, first we have to ask: What is the objective of the decapitation strategy?

The problem is that **no one** has articulated the main objective. What is the purpose of the strategy? **If the objective is to protect national security, then decapitation IS arguably effective.** If the cartels have ballooned up to a size where they pose a legitimate threat to the State, then national security is at stake.

If national security is at stake, the military is best suited to intervene. By “cutting off the heads” the military is decentralizing control, fragmenting the cartels in such a way that they become smaller, manageable units.

PROBLEM: Decapitation then becomes effective as a means of protecting national security, but NOT public safety. Because of the fragmentation of cartels, they begin lashing out at each other, creating more violence for the public. This would be mitigated by a police force, but Mexico doesn’t HAVE an effective police force almost anywhere, except Mexico City.

So for instance, if the objective of decapitation has been to protect national security, then it is effective. Because the cartels ballooned up to a point where they threatened the State's legitimacy, the only way to deal with them was to fracture them. Once fractured, the cartels no longer pose a **national security** threat, but instead pose a **public safety** threat. But because the military isn't trained to deal with public safety, just national security, decapitation, while maintaining national security, increases violence. So then, if the objective was to reduce

violence, decapitation failed. But if the objective was to protect national security, decapitation was successful.

Analysis of Alternatives offered by Rodrigo Canales :

Okay let's say that we don't decapitate. What else can we do?

Alternate option 1: Do nothing. Let the status quo prevail.

- a. This is a frankly nonsensical argument. Stand by and let cartels take over a country? Not a feasible option for any modern society.

Alternate option 2: We do NOT go after the heads. Instead, we attack the midlevel officials that stray out of line. The military will then act as a deterrent.

- a. The assumption here is that by doing this, the government is sending the message "hey, you play nice or else." The drug lord will in turn get the message that he needs to keep his people in check, and everyone lives happily alongside each other. In order for this logic to work, the messages have to be clear and understandable from both sides.
- b. **PROBLEM!** It is extremely unlikely that a drug lord, who has risen to the top in a culture of "be violent and use force", will understand this message and apply it. More likely than not, as long as he or she isn't being directly affected, he or she will just keep sending in more men.

Appendix B

Original Chart from “El Universal”, Spanish version

Promedio mensual de averiguaciones previas en Tamaulipas, 2005 – 2015

Promedio mensual de averiguaciones previas					Variación %			
Año	Homicidio Doloso	Secuestro	Extorsión	Robo con Violencia	Homicidio Doloso	Secuestro	Extorsión	Robo con Violencia
2005-2009	26.07	1.95	5.55	204.32				
2010	60.08	3.92	8.92	420.25	130.50%	100.85%	60.66%	105.69%
2011	71.25	10.75	13.08	685.92	18.59%	174.47%	46.73%	63.22%
2012	84.67	10.25	12.83	642.58	18.83%	-4.65%	-1.91%	-6.32%
2013	46.33	16.33	18.75	520.00	-45.28%	59.35%	46.10%	-19.08%
2014	52.33	21.83	15.75	435.92	12.95%	33.67%	-16.00%	-16.17%
2015*	47.67	19.00	15.78	491.89	-8.92%	-12.98%	0.18%	12.84%

***Datos hasta septiembre de 2015**