

The Takeaway

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Policing on Drugs

The United States, Mexico, and the Origins of the Modern Drug War, 1969–2000

AILEEN TEAGUE

The Bush School of Government & Public Service

Images of cartels, masked security forces, and soaring homicide rates dominate how the world understands Mexico's drug war today. What is usually missing from the conversation is why drug enforcement became so violent and the role of the United States in promoting drug violence. By drawing on the findings of Policing on Drugs, a new book by Bush School Professor Aileen Teague, this Takeaway shows that Mexico's contemporary security crisis is the result of decades of militarized policing shaped jointly by the priorities of the United States and Mexican state.

MEXICO'S DRUG WAR DID NOT BEGIN IN THE 2000s

Journalistic and policy discussions often portray Mexico's drug war as a recent phenomenon, attributing it to cartel turf wars, Mexico's shift from one-party rule in 2000, or heightened border enforcement after 9/11. These explanations identify important



WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Militarized policies create lasting costs, as short-term measures can ultimately erode institutions and empower non-state actors.

Drug enforcement that ignores local and political realities can heighten instability by fueling both repression and resistance.

Drug policy is about more than drugs. Sovereignty, migration, trade, and regional security combine in ways that demand historical awareness.

To reduce violence, future policy must address historical legacies, not just treat the drug war as a current issue.

inflection points, but they obscure a longer and more consequential history.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the United States dramatically expanded its war on drugs beyond its own borders and pushed drug-producing countries to adopt militarized enforcement strategies. Mexico, governed by the authoritarian Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), became a critical partner in this effort. At the same time, however, the PRI was fighting its own internal battle against political dissent during a period known as *la guerra sucia* (Dirty War).

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Policing on Drugs demonstrates how a war on drugs and a struggle against domestic political opposition became deeply entwined. Instead of eliminating drugs, violent policing became institutionalized.

EXTERNALIZING THE U.S. WAR ON DRUGS

In 1969, President Richard Nixon launched Operation Intercept, a sudden and near-total shutdown of the U.S.-Mexico border intended to halt the flow of Mexican drugs into the United States. The operation crippled cross-border commerce and sent a clear signal: drug abuse at home would be addressed through enforcement abroad.

Operation Intercept marked a fundamental shift. Previously, U.S. drug control relied primarily on domestic regulation and taxation. By the early 1970s, drug control was reframed as a national security issue requiring overseas intervention. This logic culminated in Nixon's 1971 declaration of a formal "war on drugs."

For U.S. policymakers, controlling supply abroad offered solutions to domestic drug abuse that seemed unavailable at home. Rising drug abuse, fears of crime, Vietnam War unrest, and social upheaval encouraged the belief that militarized enforcement—both domestic and foreign—could restore order.

MEXICO'S DIRTY WAR AND THE POLICING OF PEOPLE

While the United States was externalizing its drug control, Mexico was grappling with challenges to PRI rule. Beginning in the 1950s and intensifying through the 1960s and 1970s, students, workers, teachers, and peasants mobilized against authoritarian governance. The PRI responded with repression, surveillances, disappearances, and massacres.

To international audiences, especially in Washington, the PRI portrayed this repression as part of the Cold War fight against communism. In practice, "the Left" in Mexico often meant simply *anti-PRI*. Drug enforcement provided a convenient cover.

The same soldiers, police officers, and intelligence agents responsible for crushing dissent were assigned to drug control operations. U.S. antidrug aid, helicopters, weapons, training, and intelligence, enhanced the Mexican state's ability to police its own population.

MILITARIZED POLICING AS THE COMMON THREAD

The organizing concept of *Policing on Drugs* is militarized policing: the use of military tools, doctrines, and mentalities for civilian law enforcement. This approach appealed to both governments, albeit for different reasons. For the United States, militarized drug control offered a way to address domestic anxieties about crime, disorder, and later, declining geopolitical influence. For Mexico, militarized policing allowed the PRI to suppress dissent while maintaining the appearance of cooperation with U.S. counternarcotics priorities.

Drug control was never a fixed or singular concept. It is a flexible policy instrument that meant different things at different moments. That flexibility made it useful far beyond reducing drug consumption.

OPERATION CONDOR AND THE TURN TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

Nowhere was this clearer than the 1975 Operation Condor. Condor was a massive, U.S.-supported campaign to eradicate drug crops in northwestern Mexico using herbicides and tens of thousands of soldiers.

For U.S. officials, Condor symbolized progress in overseas supply control. For the PRI, it represented a continuation of counterinsurgency by other means. Soldiers policed rural communities, displaced populations, and committed human rights abuses in regions long targeted for political repression.

When marijuana sprayed with herbicides reached U.S. consumers, health scares briefly shifted attention northward. Responsibility for the violence and destruction on the ground, however, remained diffuse.

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WHEN COOPERATION BECAME CONFLICT

By the 1980s, the PRI's need for widespread repression waned, but U.S. antidrug involvement intensified. The 1985 kidnapping and murder of DEA Agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena marked a turning point.

Camarena's death exposed the depth of corruption within Mexican policing and led to unprecedented U.S. intervention in Mexican law enforcement. Operation Leyenda, the DEA's four-year investigation, effectively ceded significant aspects of Mexico's drug policing sovereignty to U.S. agencies.

This shift culminated in the Reagan administration's 1986 National Security Decision Directive 221, which formally linked drug trafficking to national security threats and authorized expanded military involvement in overseas drug control.

GLOBALIZATION, TRADE, AND SECURITIZATION

The 1990s added a new layer of contradiction. Economic integration under NAFTA facilitated

greater cross-border movement of goods, while drug policing became increasingly securitized.

Small farmers displaced by trade liberalization found few alternatives outside the illicit economy. At the same time, enforcement models emphasizing militarization rather than development or public health deepened insecurity.

By the time the PRI lost power in 2000, Mexico faced a paradox: intensified policing alongside weakened state authority in many regions. Drug trafficking organizations filled the vacuum left by decades of repression and uneven governance.

WHY THIS HISTORY MATTERS TODAY

Contemporary drug violence cannot be understood without considering the historical roots. The implementation of militarized policing strategies entrenched patterns of corruption, abuse of power, and social fragmentation. These patterns are lasting, and shape how security challenges have evolved on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Understanding this history complicates familiar narratives. Mexico was not merely a victim of U.S. pressure, nor was the United States fully in control of outcomes. Instead, drug violence developed through a complex, transnational process impacted by conflicting and overlapping interests on both sides of the border. To reduce violence, future policy must address historical legacies, not just treat the drug war as a current issue.

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The Bush School of Government and Public Service
4220 TAMU, Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843-4220

Email: bushschoolmosbacher@tamu.edu
Website: <https://bush.tamu.edu/mosbacher>

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Aileen Teague is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government & Public Service. Her research focuses on U.S.-Latin American relations, drug policy, militarization, and Cold War security. She is a former U.S. military officer and a dual citizen of Panama and the United States. She conducted multi-archival research in the United States and Mexico for *Policing on Drugs*, which is available through [Oxford University Press](https://www.oxfordup.com/9780197529111).

Aileen Teague Policing on Drugs



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