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Drug Trafficking in Mexico:
A First General Assessment

by

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Abstract

Media commonly presents Mexico’s drug scene as a perfect copy of the Colombian model, ignoring, among other points, that drug trafficking in Mexico began about sixty years before the Colombians got an important share of the American drug market, the different political systems in both countries, and the historical and structural relationship of subordination of drug traffickers to political power observed in Mexico. The lack of more academic research in Mexico on drug-related problems is another reason for replicating totally mechanically Colombian particularities to the Mexican experience. And last, but not least, the U.S.A. government discourses (both those made by McCaffrey, the U.S.A. drug tzar, and the DEA) on drug issues in Mexico, and in many other countries, have succeeded in imposing a kind of symbolic domination. They have become, more than the Mexican government discourse on the same subject, the official versions of what has to be perceived and believed by the public opinion about the Mexican case.

Those discourses are never completely objective nor politically neutral and have created some misunderstandings and frictions between the two governments. Despite the overwhelming information and common places generated by U.S.A. officials and reproduced world-wide by the media about drug trafficking in Mexico, there are still many questions that some social researchers are posing and trying to answer. These concern in particular the historical sociology of the phenomenon in the country, the U.S.A.-Mexico relations on drug issues, the subculture of drug trafficking, drug use, and the dynamics of the relationship between drug traffickers and political power. The objective of this paper is to show a synthetic, comprehensive vision of those drug-related problems in Mexico since the end of the last century.
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Legality and Prohibition

In the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, drugs such as marijuana, opiates and cocaine were commonly used in Mexico, specially opiates, basically for medical reasons. Laudanum and other opium derivatives such as morphine and heroin, as well as pharmaceuticals such as cocaine, coca wines and marijuana cigarettes were prescribed by doctors and easily obtained in pharmacies, popular markets and even hardware stores. The authorities were concerned about the quality of these products and tried to protect the consumers. Addicts were considered as ill persons not as criminals. There had been some attempts to control laudanum, poppy and marijuana commerce since 1870, but they did not succeed.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the U.S.A. government was very active in the international arena, trying to convince other countries to accept opium control and create special laws to punish the offenders. The Shanghai Conference in 1909 for opium control was the beginning of the U.S.A. diplomacy on drugs. The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914, aimed at controlling opium consumption, was a sort of founding reason to expand American official perceptions and laws on drugs world-wide. At that time, the Mexican revolution was taking place. Revolutionary leaders in Mexico were more interested in political survival than in controlling opium trafficking which was of special concern for them. Prohibition on one side of the U.S.A.-Mexican border and legal commerce on the other created the conditions for drug trafficking.

Poppy culture existed in Mexico since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century (1886) in the north-western state of Sinaloa, for example. On 19 January 1917, congresswoman (Coahuila) Dr. José María Rodríguez proposed an amendment to the fraction XVI of article 73 of the Constitution, which gave powers to the Congress to dictate laws on citizenship, naturalisation, colonisation, emigration and immigration, and general health in the country. Among the reasons for the amendment was the concern about alcoholism and the “selling of substances which poison the individual and degenerate the (Mexican) race”. He named opium, morphine, ether, cocaine, and marijuana. The purpose was to stop “the abuse in the commerce of these substances so noxious to health”, to interrupt their “immoderate or non-medical use”. According to him, mortality had increased because of the lack of official control on those drugs. In the discussions about the pertinence of the amendment, diseases and alcoholism were the main concern of other congressmen. Rodríguez was the only one to mention drugs. The amendment was approved.

Most of the illicit drug trade was taking place through Mexicali and Tijuana, in the territory of Baja California, governed by colonel Esteban Cantú (1916-1920), suspected by the American authorities of controlling opium trafficking. According to customs officials from Los Angeles, the governor would resell through his father-in-law's family what he seized from drug traffickers. Addicts to opium or other drugs were not very important in terms of numbers, and "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker *dixit*) like those in the U.S.A. did not exist. In that context, congressman Rodriguez's proposition seems more like a eugenic and public health concern than a calculated strategy to diminish one of the governor's illegal sources of revenues, a decision to stop drug smuggling at the border, or a concession to please the American government. It was obviously not a more complex interest in a certain need of opium prohibition nation-wide. Years later, poppy fields were particularly concentrated, besides Sinaloa, in some other north-western states such as Sonora, Chihuahua and Durango.

Marijuana culture and commercialisation was prohibited in Mexico in 1920, poppy in 1926. According to Mexican officials an argument for this was "race degeneration" provoked by these and other drugs, such as cocaine. Perception of the social and political elites was mimed on the ideas created and reproduced by members of the same social groups in the United States and Europe. Drug use and abuse in Mexico was not a widespread phenomenon and the number of people concerned was far from the figures of its northern neighbour. Marijuana use was generally related to soldiers, criminals and poor people; opium smoking to Chinese minorities; and morphine, heroin and cocaine to artists, middle class and bourgeois degenerated individuals. Drug traffickers' main business was north of the border.

**Drug trafficking and political power**

The most important illegal plants cultivated in Mexico were poppy and marijuana. Coca plantations did not exist. For many decades opium trafficking was the main source - but obviously not the only one - of Mexican traffickers' revenues, the source of their primary accumulation. In the state of Sinaloa, people invented a special word, *gomero*, for opium traffickers. As David Musto says, even though there were some marijuana users in the thirties in the U.S.A., it was not until the sixties that marijuana consumption was generalised. The American authorities, especially Harry J. Anslinger, Chief of the Bureau of Narcotic Drugs (BND), were concerned about marijuana use in the U.S.A. There was a

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6 *Diario Oficial*, 03/15/1920; *La Farmacia*, June, 1926.
7 *La Voz de Sinaloa*, 03/03/1947.
sort of marijuana hysteria in the media to which Anslinger contributed. The *Marijuana Tax Act*, to control the transportation and selling of the plant, was approved in 1937.

In the thirties, marijuana production could be counted already in tons in states like Puebla, Guerrero and Tlaxcala, and some of the alleged owners of the crops living in Mexico City, such as “Lola la Chata”, were suspected of being protected by high ranking members of the anti-narcotics police. At the same time, drug traffickers from the north-western region were making fortunes out of opium smuggling, developing their routes through Nogales, Mexicali, Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. In Coahuila, according to the investigation report sent by special agent Juan Requena to the Mexican Department of Public Health, the most important opium trafficker, the Chinese Antonio Wong Yin, was a *compadre* of governor Nazario Ortiz Garza. Others were in close touch with general Jesús García Gutiérrez, who was in charge of military operations in the state. Similar situations were reported in a less precise way about governors from Baja California and Chihuahua. Doctor and General José Siurob, the Department of Public Health Chief, recognised in 1937 that anti-narcotic agents used to be paid with the drug they seized. Once, he said, a governor sent some cans of opium to his office, but when they were opened they contained only tar. There were obviously different levels of perception about the need to control drug trafficking and the seriousness of the drug control politics.

A political scandal of unknown proportions exploded in 1947 when General Pablo Macías Valenzuela, ex-Secretary of War and Navy (National Defense) and governor of the state of Sinaloa (1945-1950), was suspected of leading a drug trafficking ring or protecting the opium traffickers. The information was published by national newspapers such as *Excélsior* and *El Universal*. According to Jesús Lazcano Ochoa, Attorney General of Sinaloa in Valenzuela’s government, the governor had never even seen opium in his life until he showed him some samples seized from the traffickers. The Attorney General added that the accusations were inventions of his political enemies who also suspected him of having masterminded the assassination of his predecessor, Col. Rodolfo T. Loaiza (1941-1944), from the Lázaro Cárdenas group. The scandal cooled off after a private meeting with president Miguel Alemán, when he was on an official visit in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, six days after the first note appeared in the press against Valenzuela. The governor finished his term

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10 *El Universal*, 04/14/1938.

11 Confidential Memorandum, Department of Public Health, México, D.F., 06/16/1931, in Social Security Historical Archive (AHSS), Public Health Fund (FSP), Legal Service Section (SSJ), Box 28, file 6.; Report of Juan Requena to the Public Health Department Chief, México, D.F., July 20, 1931, in AHSS, FSP, SSJ, Box 28, file 6.

12 Report of Dr. Bernardo Báez B., Sanitary Delegate in Baja California, to Dr. Demetrio López, Chemistry and Pharmacy Service Chief, Department of Health, Mexicali, B.C., 08/19/1931, in AHSS, FSP, SSJ, box 28, file 8.


and became Commander of the 1st Military Zone (1951-1956). It was the first time the
drug trafficking issue was used publicly and politically by one power elite group against
another.

In 1947, the year the CIA was founded, President Alemán created the Security Federal
Agency (Dirección Federal de Seguridad-DFS), a kind of President’s political police, also
with the power of intervention in drug issues. That same year, drug policy, traditionally an
attribution of the Department of Health, was transferred to the Attorney General’s Office
(Procuraduría General de la República-PGR). Reports from the American Embassy in
Mexico to the Department of State in Washington remarked on the unreliable backgrounds
of the people put at the head of the DFS, suspected of being involved or controlling drug
trafficking. Among them, Senator (Distrito Federal) and Colonel Carlos I. Serrano, the real
chief and brain behind the scenes, close friend of President Alemán.

It is important to note that, since the beginning of the drug business, the best known drug
traffickers in Mexico were related in special official reports in Mexico and the U.S.A. to
high ranking politicians. More precisely, these politicians were suspected of being directly
involved in the illegal trade and even of controlling it. In that scenario, free-lancers or
outsiders would not have any chances to build up their own networks and succeed in their
efforts. The political system emerged after the Mexican revolution was a state party system,
a social pyramid with the President at the top, concentrating powers over the legislative and
the judicial branches. Governors’ fidelity – most of them military officers formed on the
battlefields – was in many cases assured in exchange of a certain liberty to do any kind of
business. The limits were the President’s will, their own entrepreneurial capacity, and their
ethical dispositions. In that context, drug trafficking was just another profitable business
that could be achieved by powerful members of the “revolutionary family”, because of the
political positions occupied by some of them at a given moment. Controlled, tolerated or
regulated by mighty politicians in northern states, drug trafficking seems to have been a
business that was developed from within the power structure, and drug traffickers do not
give the impression of having emerged as an early autonomous specialised social group, but
rather as a new class of outlaws that depended closely on political and police protection and
was banned from political activity, according to recent U.S.A. and Mexican archives and
newspaper archives investigations.

Since the prohibition years in the twenties until 1947, governors from northern states where
illicit plants were cultivated seem to have had an important and sometimes direct role in
controlling drug trafficking and traffickers. After 1947, the DFS and the Federal Judicial
Police (Policía Judicial Federal-PJF, depending on the PGR) as well as the army, became,
more than before, the institutions responsible for fighting against the forbidden trade.
Imputations on governors were transmuted into indictments against members of those
institutions, protecting governors from an eventual political pressure because of drug affairs
and leaving police agents and the military assuming the consequences of the dangerous and

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195; La Voz de Sinaloa, 03/31/1951.
19 General Records of the Department of State, Report of the Assistant Military Attaché on the National
Security Police of Mexico (confidential, n° 4543), Embassy of the United States of America, Mexico, D.F.,
09/04/1947, Record Group 59, 812.05/9-447, U.S.A. National Archives II, College Park, Md.
structural liaisons with drug traffickers. In a way, this new structure created an institutional mediation between drug traffickers and the political powers, groups who previously had a direct line of communication. On one hand, the drug business grew very quickly during the war years and did not stop in the aftermath. More social agents belonging to the power structure placed in strategic positions where business was booming had the possibility of making quick and easy profits, and so they did. But, on the other hand, police agents and the military also had the role of preventing drug traffickers from becoming completely autonomous or getting so wild as to go beyond certain limits of socially and historically tolerated violence. As long as the outlaws were politically controlled, federal agents could get a piece of the cake, not so big as to become autonomous themselves, and certainly not without sharing profits with their superiors in the political structure. That was the rule in order to secure impunity.

Sinaloa and the gomeros

For many reasons, the state of Sinaloa has become a paradigmatic case in the study of drug trafficking in Mexico. Articulated since the end of the nineteenth century to the economy of California and Arizona in the U.S.A., the opium produced in that state followed the same route as certain agricultural products that were exported via the Pacific railroad. Chinese immigrants and local producers and traders, mostly but not exclusively from the mountains of Badiague (a municipal division of the state of Sinaloa) transported their merchandise to the border cities of Nogales, Mexicali and Tijuana. Criminals by law, they were merchants, some of them from wealthy families, peasants, adventurers, and middle class people, living in cities and towns where everybody knew each other, who decided to tempt the devil and tried to make quick money to get rich, to capitalise their legal business, or to earn a living living. Those who persisted and specialised in drug trafficking, those who became professionals, were, most of the time, people from the mountains where poppy fields bloomed. They created dynasties, transmitted their know-how to the successive generations and succeeded in founding a source of permanent drug trafficking leaders to manage the business nation-wide. In the long term, they appear as a kind of oligopoly: they have been leading the most important drug trafficking groups since the beginning of prohibition; the power of the groups has not followed the six-year political cycles; and they have never shown any interest in organizing themselves in politics, as Carlos Lehder, Pablo Escobar and the Extraditables did in Colombia.

There was an early process of “naturalisation” of drug trafficking in some regions of Mexico. Anybody could be a trafficker. A brother, a cousin, a friend, a neighbour, a friend’s friend. In rural areas with few people in the villages it was very easy to know who cultivated illegal plants. They needed legal cultures to survive, and illegal ones to live a better life. An important and interesting reason to accept the coexistence with traffickers was the absence of drug use and abuse, specially opium and its derivatives. They produced for the market abroad, not for local consumption, except perhaps for marijuana which was used for medical or recreational purposes. Another reason was the level of violence. In

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20 See: Manuel Lazcano Ochoa, Una vida..., op. cit., pp. 198-247. The author was Attorney General of Sinaloa three times: in the forties, the sixties and the eighties.
small towns, it was more difficult, although not impossible, to resort to violence because almost all the inhabitants were related. There was room for everybody in the drug business, so it was not necessary to fight to death to get a share of the market. Traffickers’ ethics were more related to the logic of the economy than to law or religion. Besides, in their experience, police agents and the military, representing the state and in charge of destroying illegal plants and chasing traffickers, were sometimes really doing their job and other times promoting the business and trying to make a profit like everybody else. Trust and respect became relative values. Why then act according to the law if the authorities did not or did so in an erratic way?

To commercialise opium, peasants from the mountains had to come down to the cities. They chose to stay in neighbourhoods at the periphery, places sharing both rural and urban facilities to make their stay more comfortable, or the transition easier for those who wanted a new life. In the saloons they frequented, alcohol, music and pistols were usually a deadly combination. The reasons for the shootings were not always related to drug affairs, but some traffickers began to use the saloons and the neighbourhood in which they lived as battlefields. For that reason, in the fifties, the press in Culiacán, for example, named the city “a new Chicago with gangsters in sandals”21. The business had grown and so had the violence associated with it. Confrontations in urban areas were between traffickers or against the police in specific spaces, not everywhere in the city. In general, innocent people were not touched. It was not a blind violence.

In the Culiacán press, there were also editorials asking the United Nations for permission to cultivate poppy in Sinaloa, like in Yugoslavia, India, Turkey and Iran. It would be a source of work and wealth, they argued. Mexico, and Sinaloa in particular, was the only opium-producing country in Latin America – and good quality – they added. Opium and its derivatives were only used by Chinese minorities and some “degenerate” rich people; the majority of the Mexican citizens were not affected, they said. In an address to the Mexican government they advised it to use the funds from poppy eradication in the fight against marijuana cultivation. The latter was perceived as a plant whose use would make people degenerate, drive them mad and lead them to crime.

The proposition was difficult to accept by the government, they said, because campaigns against drugs depended on treaties with the U.S.A. The director of the newspaper which published those editorials later became Attorney General of Sinaloa (1951-1952)22. A paradox indeed, and a clear example of the different levels of perception of the official drug policy designed by the federal government. It was also an example of a higher degree of tolerance and pragmatism of important social groups in Sinaloa, who knew first hand the meaning of the old illegal business for the local economy. For the first time, newspapers from Mexico City used the word “narcotrafficker”23 as a more legitimate designation for gomeros, commonly used by traffickers themselves and by people who recognized them as a newly-forming social group. The term was neither commonly used in the official discourse of that time, nor widespread in the media, but was years later.

21 La Voz de Sinaloa, 10/25/1951.
22 El Diario de Culiacán, 02/08, 03/02, 06/18, 07/12/1950.
23 Excélsior, 09/10/1956; Novedades, 08/19/1957.
According to Mexican authorities, campaigns against drugs in the fifties were so successful as suggest a “definitive liquidation” in Sinaloa\textsuperscript{24}. They were exaggerating, of course, thinking about the acceptance of the U.S.A. government and the U.N. observers. Their strategy provoked the immediate expansion of illegal cultivation in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit and Michoacán. Tougher measures in one place created trafficking problems in another: this was consistently observed throughout the years of drug campaigns. Drug trafficking – mostly opium – via planes was so intense that the Minister of Communications and Public Works decided to suspend commercial flights in some airfields in Sinaloa, Sonora, Chihuahua and Durango in 1953, and closed the Aviation School in Culiacán. A former pilot and flight instructor at that time recognised having transported opium on his plane very often; however, he said, national airline companies (Aeronaves de México) had done it on a bigger scale. Miguel Urias, a very important drug trafficker from Badiraguato was in charge of selling the tickets to fly from Bacacarragua, a small opium-producing town in the sierra of that municipality, to other places\textsuperscript{25}. The official successful results of these campaigns were of merely rhetoric nature.

It was estimated that there were three hundred clandestine airfields in northern Mexico in the sixties. Interpol announced that Mexico had taken the place formerly occupied by Cuba in the “transatlantic narcotic trafficking”. Sinaloa, Durango and Sonora were mentioned as places where extensive poppy fields existed\textsuperscript{26}. Other smaller plantations were destroyed in Michoacán, Guerrero, Durango, Morelos, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Baja California, Estado de México, Zacatecas, etc\textsuperscript{27}. For the PGR, Sinaloa was ranked first in marijuana and poppy cultivation\textsuperscript{28}. The most impressive figures in the sixties were those concerning marijuana. American soldiers’ and students’ demand for drugs had an immediate effect in terms of Mexican offer. In 1966, the PGR reported the destruction, in 45 days, of three thousand tons of marijuana only in Chihuahua and Sinaloa\textsuperscript{29}. According to some American anti-narcotics officials from San Diego, 75 or 80 percent of the heroin and almost all of the marijuana introduced to the U.S.A. came from Mexico\textsuperscript{30}. In 1968, \textit{Look} magazine estimated marijuana smuggling from Mexico to the U.S.A. at around 3.5 to 5 tons per week\textsuperscript{31}. In 1969, president Nixon launched “Operation Intercept”\textsuperscript{32}, translated into meticulous car inspection for drugs at the border. This was the beginning of a new era on drug politics in the U.S.A.-Mexico relations.

The marijuana boom created more quick fortunes than before. The number of users and the number of new, younger and wilder players in the drug business grew in an exponential way. The unwritten codes were broken. Assassination of high ranking police officers was a

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{La Palabra}, 04/19/1956.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{La Voz de Sinaloa}, 03/27, 04/02/1953; Efraín González, \textit{Crónicas de la aviación en Sinaloa}, Culiacán, Difocur, 1994, pp. 102, 109–110.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Novedades}, 03/17/1960; \textit{El Universal}, 07/09/1967.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{El Universal}, 07/21/1962.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{La Voz de Sinaloa}, 01/31/1963.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Excélsior}, 10/07/1966.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{El Nacional}, 05/20/1960.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{La Voz de Sinaloa}, 02/27/68.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{La Voz de Sinaloa}, 09/19/1969.
sign of changing times. Older drug traffickers, suspected of the killing of the chief of the Judicial Police in Sinaloa in 1969\textsuperscript{33}, refused the accusations and blamed younger traffickers who did not respect the old rules of the game (i.e. not to mess with a higher hierarchy of the police forces and not to use the city as battlefield). They used M-1 machineguns and .38 pistols. The 9th Military Zone Commander in Culiacán said things were changing thanks to the active role the Army was playing, and criticised agents of the PJF who “used to fight among themselves to come to Sinaloa”\textsuperscript{34}, meaning they wanted to be where the quick money was. Federal police agents were qualified as “Attila’s Hordes” by the local press\textsuperscript{35}.

A new generation was emerging and trying to impose its own law. Decades of drug trafficking and generations of traffickers had produced a new breed of tougher players, richer and more powerful at a younger age than their ancestors. They were more sure of themselves, they did not hide, they moved to other new and respected middle-class neighbourhoods, drove cars with American license plates and had many parties where \textit{tambora}, regional music, played for days; they were proud of being drug traffickers. As for the rest of society, their attitude was a mix of astonishment, fear, admiration and respect. If violence did not touch them directly, they were not particularly worried and had no explicit and public moral judgement against the traffickers’ way of life or business.

**Operation Condor**

In the mid-seventies, the Mexican federal government launched the most impressive military operation against drug plantations and traffickers called “Operation Condor”\textsuperscript{36}. Ten thousand soldiers under the command of General José Hernández Toledo, who had participated in the 1968 students massacre in Tlatelolco and in battles against universities such as UNAM, Nicolaita and Sonora, were sent to the sierra of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua to destroy the illegal plantations. The PGR representative was Carlos Aguilar Garza. General Hernández predicted the end of drug trafficking in six months\textsuperscript{37}. Despite the use of defoliants and human rights violations, he did not succeed. Instead, hundreds of peasants fled to other states; so did big drug traffickers who continued their business and way of life. Aguilar Garza became a drug trafficker himself years later and was assassinated in 1993. Tons of drugs were destroyed, production was reduced, prices rose, but drugs continued to flow into the American market, although in lesser quantity of Mexican origin. Many villages in the sierra were deserted. Hundreds of people were arrested, tortured and sent to jail, but not a single big boss\textsuperscript{38}. The most important group leaders moved to Guadalajara, Jalisco, and continued their business on a bigger scale thanks to cocaine which they had already been smuggling on a large scale since 1975.

\textsuperscript{33} La Voz de Sinaloa, 06/18, 07/08/1969.
\textsuperscript{34} La Voz de Sinaloa, 01/29/1969.
\textsuperscript{35} La Voz de Sinaloa, 01/16/1969.
\textsuperscript{37} Noroeste, 02/08 10/1977.
\textsuperscript{38} Excélsior, 06/17/78, 06/04/1979; Proceso, 10/09/1978, n° 101.
according to the DEA. The military and political success claimed by the authorities was just a mirage. In the long term, the social cost of the military operation was more important for a large number of people, whose negative attitude towards federal police and the military was reinforced, than the spectacular destruction of illegal plants which made Mexican and American anti-narcotics officials so happy and optimistic. According to both governments, their collaboration – through DEA agents and their counterparts, for example – had never been as good and efficient. This did not last very long.

The Camarena affair

At the end of November 1984, Mexican authorities discovered an enormous marijuana plantation, called “The Buffalo”, about 12 square kilometers, in the state of Chihuahua. Twelve thousand people, or more, from different Mexican states and even from Guatemala, worked there. Rafael Caro Quintero, a drug trafficker from Badiraguato, was suspected to be the owner. On February 7, 1985, DEA agent Enrique Camarena and Mexican pilot Alfredo Zavala Avelar, were kidnapped in Guadalajara in different places. Days later, John Gavin, the American Ambassador, and Francis Mullen, DEA chief, said in a press conference that the discovery of the marijuana plantation was due to American intelligence work, affirmed that Guadalajara was the centre of national and international drug trafficking, and gave some figures about drug groups, leaders and percentage of heroin of Mexican origin introduced to the U.S.A. The Attorney General’s Office and the Department of Customs decided to put political pressure on the Mexican government. Operation “Stop and Seize” at the border, a sort of remake of “Operation Intercept”, was the strategy for pushing the Mexican authorities to resolve the kidnapping case. DEA chief accused DFS agents of having protected, and PJF permitted, Caro’s runaway from Guadalajara airport. His words were reproduced in the Washington Post and broadcast by the NBC. He lost his job.

About a month after the kidnapping, two half-buried bodies with torture signs were found in the state of Michoacán. Four days before the discovery, a hundred police agents from Jalisco had massacred some members of a family living near the place where the bodies were found. The police accused one of the deceased to be the kidnapper and executioner. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, governor of Michoacán, pointed out the illegal behavior of the neighbour state police and protested in a letter published in the press. Officially, Camarena and Zavala were killed because of the damage they had caused to the traffickers. They informed the authorities about the “Buffalo” and certainly knew too much. Camarena was working on a special assignment called “Operation Godfather”, aimed at investigating the activities of the Sinaloan Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, the suspected “Godfather” of drug trafficking in Mexico, the “boss of bosses”. He was also accused in the Camarena case, as was Ernesto Fonseca, from Badiraguato, another “family” chief.

40 R. Craig, “Operation... , op. cit.
41 The information for this chapter is synthesized from numerous sources: E. Shannon, Desperados..., op. cit.; Proceso, N° 420, 433-437, 439, 440-444, 449, 512, 599, 601, 603, 621, 672, 686, 689, 690, 697, 703, 704, 707, 708, 787, 816, 841-844, 854.
The honeymoon that had existed during “Operation Condor” became a nightmare for the Mexican government when the DEA agent was killed. A lot of information gathered by American anti-narcotics agents on Mexico throughout the years, specially on the old special and dangerous relationship between drug traffickers and DFS and PJF agents was delivered to the media. The Camarena case was a catalyst, a special occasion to show the level of corruption of Mexican police agents, and even politicians. Some agents and police commanders, accused of protecting Caro, were put in jail. DFS and Interpol-Mexico directors were removed. Caro was captured on April 4, 1985, in Costa Rica, and sentenced on December 12, 1989, to 92 years in prison. Fonseca did not escape either. Félix Gallardo was caught in Guadalajara on April 8, 1989. In May 1994, he was sentenced to 40 years.

The Camarena case did not end with the incarceration of police agents and big drug traffickers. The second chapter of the story began in January 1990 when NBC broadcast the program Drug Wars, based on the book Desperados (1988) by Time journalist Elaine Shannon, whose main source of information was the DEA. The TV series showed the story of the good guys, DEA agents, against the bad guys, Mexican officials, police and military. Mexican authorities felt offended and protested. Miguel Aldana Ibarra, ex-chief of Interpol-Mexico said he doubted Camarena was dead, added he might be living in California or Colorado, and accused him of smuggling marijuana with his Mexican drug trafficker friends. Some media controlled by the government reproduced similar versions. The White House spokesman defended Camarena’s memory. On January 31, the Los Angeles federal prosecutor formally accused Aldana, Manuel Ibarra Herrera, ex-chief of the PJF, Humberto Alvarez Machín – Caro’s family doctor – Félix Gallardo, and Honduran trafficker and Gallardo’s associate in the cocaine business Ramón Matta Ballesteros, all of them involved in Camarena’s murder. General Juan Arevalo Gardoqui, ex-Secretary of National Defence, was on their waiting list. In 1992, DEA protected and paid witnesses, recruited among Fonseca’s and Caro’s associate gunmen and bodyguards, accused Rubén Zuno Arce, owner of the house in which Camarena was killed, Manuel Bartlett, Secretary of Government, Enrique Alvarez del Castillo, Attorney General, and general Arévalo Gardoqui, of having planned the crime. Zuno, ex-President Echeverría’s brother in law, was detained in the U.S.A. in 1989, judged and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1992. In 1990, Alvarez Machín was kidnapped in Mexico by policemen paid by the DEA, delivered to DEA agents in El Paso, taken to prison, judged, and finally liberated because of lack of evidence. Accusations against high ranking politicians were never proven, but suspicions in both countries remained.

For the first time in Mexico-U.S.A. relations, members of the political elite were publicly linked to drug affairs by American authorities. This was nothing new for many people in Mexico, especially in those regions where illegal plants had been cultivated for decades and drug trafficking had become an industry. Nothing has been proved throughout the years, but it is also true that the Judicial power has not been efficient nor independent from the Executive. Political opposition in a state party system has been symbolic. The only political force the Mexican government has ever listened to, in drug matters, is the U.S.A. government. Multiple reports sent by American anti-narcotics agents to Washington since the 1910s show how much they knew and learned about drug production, trafficking, and traffickers-officials relations in Mexico. The drug issue has not always been a relevant
point in the American political agenda. The cumulative knowledge of anti-narcotics agencies has been used to put pressure on Mexican governments when needed. The “war on drugs” declared by President Reagan in the 80s, and continued during the Bush administration, enhanced the power of “drug warriors” who did not hesitate to use their information to damage the political elite image and credibility. They waited until one of their agents was killed, but they knew it long before.

**Drug trafficking organizations**

When opium was prohibited in the U.S.A. it was legal in Mexico. Social agents who commercialised it were criminals on one side of the border and legitimate traders on the other. The circle was completed when Mexico adopted similar laws. A new social category was born: the drug trafficker. Alcohol prohibition in the U.S.A. (1920-1933) and the greater demand for alcohol compared to opiates, marijuana and cocaine, made alcohol smuggling much more profitable. Bootleggers were, by far, a larger, wealthier and more powerful group. In Chicago, Al Capone\(^{42}\), a cocaine user himself, and his group of outlaws became the prototype of the gangster, the entrepreneur of the underworld. He made investments in legal business and financial contributions to political campaigns. He bought policemen and politicians. He became a legend. In Mexico, known and famous drug traffickers in the thirties such as Enrique Fernández, from Ciudad Juárez, were soon compared to Capone by the press. Interim governor (1929-1930) from Chihuahua, Luis León (Secretary of Agriculture under Calles government, and of Industry and Commerce under Ortiz Rubio) helped him get out of the Islas Marias prison\(^{43}\). Some said Fernández had made pacts with politicians. Shootings among traffickers were Chicago style. The discourse on drug trafficking resembled that used during the alcohol prohibition.

María Dolores Estévez, known as “Lola la Chata”, was the most important drug trafficker operating in Mexico City from the thirties to the fifties. Captain Luis Huesca de la Fuente, ex-chief of the Narcotics Police, was sent to jail, accused of having stolen the drug he seized and of having protected la “Chata”\(^{44}\). In Baja California, Dr. Bernardo Báez B., Delegate from the Health Department, suspected high ranking officials from the local government of protecting traffickers and sending them to prison only when they became greedy\(^{45}\). In the forties, Max Cossman, associated to Harold “Happy” Meltzer – connected himself to Mickey Cohen\(^{46}\), from the old Capone’s band, who was living in California –, was accused for the murder of Enrique Diarte, an important opium trafficker operating in Tijuana and Mexicali\(^{47}\). According to Harry Anslinger, Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, from the Luciano – Lansky group, and Virginia Hill negotiated with Mexican politicians to finance


\(^{43}\) Report of Juan Requena to..., *op. cit.*

\(^{44}\) *El Universal*, April 14, 1938.

\(^{45}\) Dr. Bernardo Báez B., Health Delegate in Baja California, to Dr. Demetrio López, Chief of Pharmacy and Chemistry Service, Health Department, Mexicali, B.C., August 19, 1931, AHSS, FSP, SSI, box 28, file 8.


poppy culture in the Northwest part of the country. Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, indicted in Camarena's murder, began his trafficker career in the fifties. In the sixties, Eduardo Fernández, Pedro Avilés and Jorge Favela, were included in a large list of traffickers from Sinaloa mentioned in the press. In the post-war years, traffickers from Sinaloa became definitely the most important in the country. They began with opium smuggling, and continued with marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamines, depending on the demand.

In the seventies, Pedro Avilés, Manuel Salcido Uzeta (the "Crazy Pig"), and especially Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, were the most common names. Félix G. was born in the suburbs of Culiacán, Sinaloa's capital. He studied for a commercial career, but decided to work as a policeman. He was assigned to the governor's house where he became his family bodyguard. The governor of Sinaloa Leopoldo Sánchez Celis (1963-1968) was his godfather when he got married. According to the DEA, Félix G., associated to Ramón Matta Ballesteros, the Honduran contact with Colombians, became the number one cocaine trafficker in Mexico starting in the mid-seventies. He lived as a respectable and respected entrepreneur for many years. His relationship with ex-governor Sánchez Celis (some said he was his protector) facilitated his political and business contacts. He was a prominent counsellor of Somex bank (Chihuahua) in 1979, and a shareholder and distinguished client at the national level at least until 1982. In 1976 there was an arrest order against him in Tijuana, but nothing was done. The charges were heroin and cocaine trafficking. He was protected by an important narcotics official, said the DEA. Starting in 1971 he accumulated at least fourteen arrest orders. He did business for four more years after Camarena's murder. He was himself godfather of the governor's son (Rodolfo) at his marriage, a dangerous liaison that caused Rodolfo's assassination when he was about to visit his godfather in prison. He had been previously abducted at the Mexico City airport and tortured.

Like the Hydra, other heads appeared after one was cut, all of them emerging from the same root. Caro's brothers and relatives, Güero Palma and "Chapo" Guzmán, the Arellano Félix brothers, and Amado Carrillo, were important lieutenants on the waiting list or already leading their own groups in different parts of the territory. They were all Sinaloans of rural origin, except the Arellano brothers, who were urban, middle class, and with a higher education. The empire was divided but the new groups were not less powerful than the original despite their rivalries. The northeast was controlled by Juan Garcia Abrego, a trafficker from Tamaulipas whose rise and fall followed the six-year political cycle and became, according to Mexican and U.S.A. authorities, the most important.

In 1993, Cardinal Jesús Posadas Ocampo and his driver were killed in a shooting as they arrived at the parking lot of the Guadalajara airport. Posadas was going to pick up

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49 Proceso, nº 650.
50 Again, the most important sources for the reconstruction of criminal trajectories are E. Shannon, op. cit., and the weekly magazine Proceso.
52 For a detailed analysis of Posada's case see: Fernando M. González, Una historia sencilla: la muerte accidental de un cardenal, México, UNAM-Plaza y Valdés, 1996.
Girolamo Prigione, the Vatican’s representative in Mexico. The Attorney General, Jorge Carpizo, said that Arellano’s gunmen had mistaken him for “Chapo” Guzman because their cars were alike: same model, same colour. Guzman, who was not very far from there with his people, repelled the attack and ran away under a rain of bullets. Minutes later, some gunmen and one of the Arellano brothers took a regular flight to Tijuana. The PGR could not explain why nobody tried to stop them. Guzman was caught the next month and sent to Almoloya high security prison. The elder of the Arellanos, Francisco Rafael, was accused of illegal arms use, detained in Tijuana in December 1993 and imprisoned in Almoloya. Two of his brothers, Ramón and Benjamín, held secret meetings with Prigione in December 1993 and January 1994, gave him a letter for the Pope and told Prigione their version of the story. Benjamín said Posadas was perhaps mistaken for Ramón by Guzman’s gunmen. He added that while Ramón was in Prigione’s house, the Vatican’s representative telephoned president Salinas, went to his house (Los Pinos) and had a meeting with the president himself, the Secretary of Government and the Attorney General. The Arellano brothers were ready to surrender in exchange for an arrangement. Prigione said there would always be certain unrevealed aspects about Posadas’ murder. The brothers did not accept that and decided to take a risk. The authorities did not clarify the situation. Marcos, the leader of the EZLN, has the “intuition” that Posadas was killed because he knew that some high ranking officials were implicated in the drug business, information he was about to tell to Prigione. In 1998, there are still important and influential clergy members, as well as numerous social groups nation-wide, who do not believe the “mistake” theory and are still waiting for a credible explanation.

Juan García Abrego was born in a ranch called “La Puerta”, Matamoros, Tamaulipas. He did not finish primary school. He worked as a milkman and car thief before entering the drug business with the help of his uncle, the legendary smuggler Juan N. Guerra. One of his lieutenants, Prof. Oscar López Olivares, who became an FBI informer, said he taught him even basic distinction rules such as table manners, how to dress and the appropriate way to show his Rolex. During the Salinas government (1988-1994) he became the most important drug trafficker in Mexico. He smuggled tons of cocaine, from the Cali group, to the U.S.A. A key person in his career was P.JF commander Guillermo González Calderoni. He led the team that killed Pablo Acosta, a big trafficker from Ojinaga, Chihuahua, in 1987. He arrested Jaime Herrera Nevar y Jaime Herrera Herrera in 1987, heroin traffickers from Durango, and his alleged “compadre” Miguel A. Félix Gallardo in 1989. According to an FBI infiltrated agent (SA 2620-OC) in García Abrego’s group, González Calderoni was associated to García and protected him at least since 1986. Calderoni was accused of “unexplainable enrichment” in 1993. He escaped to the U.S.A. where he is at present in the protected witness program. When the Mexican government tried to extradite him, he revealed having done political espionage work for Raúl Salinas - the president’s brother - who was suspected himself of having protected García Abrego. Raúl is now in Almoloya facing charges for “illicit enrichment” and for the murder of his ex brother in law, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, former president of the PRI. Swiss authorities have “frozen” more

54 Eduardo Valle, El segundo..., op. cit., p.131.
than $100 million in Swiss bank accounts belonging to Raul under fake names. They suspect Raul of money laundering for traffickers. Calderoni sent a warning: if the Mexican government insisted in extraditing him, he would “remember” more things57.

Garcia Abrego was captured in 1996 and immediately extradited to the U.S.A. According to Janet Reno, the U.S.A. Attorney General, Mexican and U.S.A. officials agreed to say he was an American citizen, born in La Paloma, Texas. President Zedillo justified his decision in a private meeting with some congressmen, who leaked the information to the press. He said Garcia Abrego was a very dangerous character who could set up a destabilising situation. The President’s spokesman later denied he had ever said such a thing58. In fact, the drug leader did not act as a desperado while he was being searched for. There were no bomb explosions or shootings against politicians or innocent people. There was no speculation attack against the peso, nor a flight of capital. A strange behaviour, indeed, for somebody whose fortune was officially estimated (in fact, invented) to 10 billion dollars (about 3.48% of Mexico’s GNP in 1995, $5.7 billion less than the international reserves, and $1.6 billion more than the oil revenues the same year). His alleged destabilising power did not show up at all. The National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee (NNICC) 1996 Report stated: “In Houston, Garcia-Arrego was tried and convicted on 22 counts of drug trafficking, money laundering, and operating a continuing criminal enterprise. He received a sentence of eleven consecutive life terms in prison and was fined $128 million. Garcia-Arrego’s arrest and conviction, unfortunately, had little effect on cocaine trafficking into the United States, as elements of his organization remained intact. Moreover, any reduction in territory and influence suffered by the Garcia-Arrego organization was balanced by an increase in the power of the rival Carrillo-Fuentes organization”59.

In the eighties, Amado Carrillo (“The Lord of the Skyes”), another Sinaloan, Ernesto Fonseca’s nephew according to Mexican authorities, was sent to Ojinaga, by the Félix Gallardo group, to work with Pablo Acosta60. He was suspected of having paid González Calderoni to get Acosta out of his way. When Garcia Abrego was extradited Carrillo took his place as number one on the official list. He smuggled tons of cocaine in big planes, his speciality. His group was based in Ciudad Juarez. The Arellano brothers tried to kill him once in a Mexico City restaurant (1993). His main problems began when General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, the new chief of the National Institute of Drug Combat (INCD), was accused of protecting Can-i110 for year?. He was forced to move from one place to another. The police said he travelled to Russia, the Middle East, South America and the Caribbean. He went frequently to Las Vegas62, undetected by the DEA. The Mossad paid no attention to him when he was in Jerusalem, neither did Cuban authorities when he was in their territory.

58 La Jornada, January 18, 1996.
60 T. Poppa, El zar..., op. cit., p.260.

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Mexican Military Intelligence service documents, dated January 14, 1997, stated that Carrillo did not want to give up since he wanted to make a pact with the government. He proposed to collaborate in counter-acting disorganized traffickers, stop drug sales in Mexico and direct them to the U.S.A. and Europe, help the country’s economy with his dollars, avoid the use of violence, and act as an entrepreneur, and no longer as a criminal. He wanted freedom to run his business, tranquility for his family, and 50% of his possessions. If his conditions were not satisfied, he would make his offer to other countries. For somebody who, according to the DEA, was the number one drug trafficker in the planet and chased world-wide, he was very successful in keeping himself invisible. His worst decision was to have plastic surgery in a Mexico City clinic to change his face and take off excessive fat in order to change his appearance. He died of post-surgery complications on July 4, 1997. After his death, the police said he had been trying to settle in Chile where he was buying property. He wanted to control drug trafficking without the mediation of Colombians and to expand his business to Australia. Carrillo’s career makes him one of the most entrepreneurial and cosmopolite of all Mexican drug traffickers ever.

The Arellano brothers and their Tijuana based group, as well as some other of Carrillo’s lieutenants started a new war for drug trafficking control along the U.S.A.-Mexico border and also in Jalisco. The FBI put Ramón Arellano on its top ten fugitive list on the Internet, and offered a fifty thousand dollars reward for information leading to his apprehension. Janet Reno offered a two million dollar reward for information about the brothers. The FBI informed that: “Ramon Eduardo Arellano-Felix (born in 1964) has been charged in a sealed indictment in U.S.A. District Court, Southern District of California, with Conspiracy to Import Cocaine and Marijuana. Ramon Eduardo Arellano-Felix is believed to be one of the leaders of the Arellano-Felix Organization (AFO), which is also known as the Tijuana Cartel. The AFO is a drug gang known for their large distributions of controlled substances and propensity for violence in enforcement of the operation.” The Mexican government sent the military to chase them in Tijuana, without success. Their fire power is assured by young gunmen from wealthy Tijuana families and from popular neighbourhoods in San Diego. The brothers have murdered important police officials and tried to kill in November 1997 an influential journalist in Tijuana, Jesús Blancornelas (he was seriously wounded), whose magazine _Zeta_ has given information about their activities and protectors. Despite the incarceration of an important group of their lieutenants in Mexico and the U.S.A., the Arellano brothers are still free and running their business.

**The military in anti-drug activities**

Before 1947, the Health Department was in charge of the drug policy. There were not many anti-narcotics agents to cover the whole territory. Mexican officials used to talk about “campaigns” against drugs since those days. What those agents could do to destroy the

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63 Proceso, no 1082, 07/27/97.
65 La Jornada, September 20, 1997.
66 See the FBI’s home page: http://www.fbi.gov/
illegal plants was really symbolic. In the thirties, there were people who proposed that the PGR lead anti-drug activities. President Cádénas refused and refrained his support to health authorities. In the post-war years, the U.S.A. government, worried about the probability of an increase in drug use among soldiers returning home, as had been the case in other post-war experiences, took a stronger leadership in drug affairs and tried to influence other governments, especially of countries producing poppy and marijuana, to reinforce their anti-drug policies. In 1947, President Miguel Alemán decided the PGR would be in charge of the anti-drug policy. At the same time he created the DFS, also with authority in drug matters. In 1948, the Mexican government announced a “Great Campaign” to destroy the illegal plants in the country: “The 1948 campaign involved the military for the first time as a permanently assigned eradication force...(but) only between 100 and 400 were assigned to support police agents in the destruction of one third to one-half of the entire opium poppy crop”68. The military, formally and legally under the command of the PGR in drug affairs, were placed in a key position with special mediation, containment or control, among producers and traffickers, the PJF, the DFS, and the political power. There were more players in the drug trafficking camp. From then on and for decades, the military’s hermetic attitude, the mutual protection of political families from the state party, and the law of silence, put the new mediators such as PJF and DFS agents in the centre of the accusations of drug related corruption.

The objectives of the anti-drug campaign were not easy to achieve. The territory was large and there were illegal plantations in many isolated places. Destruction by hand, even with the military’s help, did not make much difference in the amount of drug smuggled. In the sixties, the Mexican government acquired airplanes, jeeps, weapons, helicopters and spare parts from the U.S.A. The new technology helped to increase the destruction of poppy fields. According to Richard Craig, “it also made future campaigns more difficult as opium and marijuana cultivators, aware of the increased probability of aerial detection, began concealing their crops amidst legitimate ones and planting smaller plots in even more remote regions”69. After Operation Intercept in 1969, the U.S.A. government political increased pressure on Mexican authorities. By 1974 it was said that Mexico was the principal source of heroin for U.S.A. addicts. In 1976, five thousand soldiers and airmen were involved in the anti-drug campaign70. The number was ten thousand in 1977 when Operation Condor was officially launched71.

In 1986, President Reagan signed an important document concerning his “war on drugs” policy (a “war” he had already declared in 198272), the National Security Decision Directive, which considers drug trafficking a threat to U.S.A. national security, and permits the Department of Defence to get involved in a wide variety of anti-drug activities, especially on the Mexico-U.S.A. border. Some have regarded this policy as an important

70 Ibid., pp. 109-110, 116, 120.
element of the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine. The Mexican government accepted immediately that scheme of perception. Every Mexican president since Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) has repeated Reagan’s basic idea. They have also said drug trafficking is a health matter and their combat a “reason of state.”

The Bush administration continued Reagan’s policy and intensified the pressure on some Latin American governments to militarise the “war on drugs.” That was the case in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. In Mexico, things were different, but not for too long. On October 23, 1995, William Perry, Secretary of the Department of Defence, and general Barry McCaffrey – Commander-in-Chief of the U.S.A. Armed Forces Southern Command co-ordinating all national security operations in Latin America at the time, and confirmed by the U.S.A. Senate as the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) on 29 February 1996 – visited Mexican Secretary of Defence, general Enrique Cervantes Arguinre in Mexico. Perry said Mexico and the U.S.A. already had political and economic ties, but that the “third link” was lacking: the military. He announced five co-operation areas, among them one concerning anti-narcotics operations. By 1996, almost a thousand soldiers had received special training in counter-narcotics tactics in the U.S.A. The militarisation of drug combat and public security had just begun.

From November 1995, to September 1996, 72 soldiers were designated as PJF agents in a “pilot experiment” in Chihuahua. They failed in their mission to apprehend Amado Carrillo and were sent to fight the EPR guerrilla group in Guerrero. Other military occupied leading positions in the PGR structure, as high ranking officials, representatives in the states, and PJF agents. General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo was designated chief of the INCD on 6 December 1996. He had been Commander of the 9th Military Zone in Culiacán, and of the 15th Military Zone in Guadalajara, two cities where many big drug traffickers liked to live. He lasted two months in that position. On 18 February 1996, the Secretary of Defence made an astonishing announcement: general Gutiérrez had been protecting Amado Carrillo, and had been discovered and apprehended. He was sent to Almoloya and sentenced to thirteen years for arms stocking and transportation. Not everything of which he was accused has been proven yet. There are still many puzzle pieces that don’t fit. As many analysts warned and predicted, drug corruption, or suspicion of corruption and involvement, would not spare the military.

Money laundering

The placement of illicit money into the legal economy is an old practice in the world of crime. At the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, drug traffickers deposited cases of cash in American banks without any problem. They transferred the

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74 Bruce M. Bagley, “After...”, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
76 *Proceso*, November 24, 1996.
money to Colombia or to fiscal paradises throughout the world. In 1986, the U.S.A. government approved laws requiring banks to report every deposit of ten thousand dollars or more. The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 proposed to consider money laundering as a serious criminal offence, recommended national governments not to use bank secrecy as an alibi to impede legal acts against it, and asked for international co-operation. In December 1988, The Committee on Bank Regulations and Supervision Practices, formed by central banks representatives and supervising authorities from Belgium, France, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States, adopted a resolution to prevent the criminal use of the bank system for money laundering purposes. On July 1989, the G-7 and the president of the European Community Commission established in Paris the Financial Action Task Force to combat money laundering. They proposed 40 recommendations concerning the enhancement of legal national systems, the reinforcement of the financial system, and international co-operation.

A report of the Department of State in 1996 remarked on the inadequate controls of Mexico’s banking and financial system to avoid money laundering. Mexico was perceived as one of the most important money laundering centres in the Western Hemisphere. U.S.A. pressure on drug production and drug related corruption would continue, sooner or later, on legislation reforms. Mexican officials discussed the need for laws on organised crime and money laundering since 1995. In 1995, working groups from the PGR and the U.S.A. Attorney General’s Office met four times to arrange co-operation agreements on law enforcement and mutual legal help. PGR, INCD, and Army officials received assistance and technical advice from the U.S.A. government. The federal Law against Organized Crime, November 7, 1996, became the legal frame for the decisions taken by the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Credit concerning the “recycling of resources of illicit origin”. The new criteria obliged financial institutions to register “relevant operations”, meaning operations of ten thousand dollars or more.

In November 1995, Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, calculated that the world's money laundering was something between $300 and $600 billion a year. In the U.S.A. the figure was $100 billion from drug trafficking. Richard Small, from the Federal Reserve, said the U.S.A. was the first money launderer in the world. He calculated a figure of $100-300 billion a year for that country. PGR officials estimated Mexican traffickers profits to be $30 billion in 1994 (four times the oil revenues the same year, 7.1% of the GNP, and

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81 Diario Oficial, November 7, 1996; March 10, 1997.
82 La Jornada, December 1, 1995.
83 Proceso, May 20, 1996.
84 Excélsior, November 5, 1995.
almost five times the international reserves). U.S.A. authorities figures were $8-30 billion a year circulating in Mexican banks in 1996\(^85\) (2.38-8.96% of the GNP).

Since money laundering became a political issue, U.S.A. and Mexican officials have frequently accused each other's country of being a paradise for this kind of illegal business. Impossible to calculate on a scientific basis, speculations about the amount of dirty money circulating in the local or world economy have been used as a political weapon. The U.S.A. government has used controversial ways to prove money laundering activities in other countries. A recent example was "Operation Casablanca", a three-year undercover operation led by the U.S.A. Customs Service, a "six-country money-laundering investigation involving Mexican banks and drug-smuggling cartels"\(^86\) from Cali and Ciudad Juárez. For the Treasury Department, it was "the culmination of the largest, most comprehensive drug money-laundering case in the history of U.S.A. law enforcement." They arrested 112 people and seized $35 million in "illegal drug proceeds". The banks implicated were Bancomer, Confía, and Serfin. People arrested worked for those banks and others such as Banamex, Bital, Banoro, Banpais, Banorte, Promex, Santander, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya, Bancrecer, Interacciones, Unión, etc\(^87\). U.S.A. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin said: "By infiltrating the highest levels of ... international drug trafficking..., customs was able to crack the elaborate financial schemes the drug traffickers developed to launder the tremendous volumes of cash acquired as proceeds from their deadly trade". From the U.S.A. perspective it was a success. For Carlos Gómez y Gómez, president of the National Bankers Association, it was not a proof of banks' policy but of individual deviant actions. U.S.A. officials from the White House, the Department of State and even the DEA, said they were not informed about the operation until the last moment\(^88\). President Zedillo replied it was a violation of bilateral agreements and sovereignty\(^89\), and added that he would try to have the U.S.A. agents extradited for trial in Mexico. Trent Lott, the U.S.A. Senate majority leader, sent a tough letter to Zedillo criticising his position and intention\(^90\). Rosario Green, Secretary of International Relations said confidence and co-operation were damaged. She urged the parties to talk and re-establish confidence and co-operation\(^91\). Diplomatic notes and protests from different social groups did not change anything. The U.S.A. government maintained its position and would not assure that no further undercover operations would be launched again.

Drug seizure, destruction and use

Based on PGR, Army and Navy figures, it has always been easier to calculate drug destruction than production. Eradication of marijuana since the late sixties can be estimated at more than one thousand hectares per year between 1970 and 1983, more than ten

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\(^85\) *La Jornada*, September 6, 1996.

\(^86\) Dave Skidmore (AP), "112 arrested in drug, money laundering bust", *Boston Globe Online*, 05/18/98.

\(^87\) *La Jornada*, 05/19/98.

\(^88\) *La Jornada*, 05/28/98.

\(^89\) *El Financiero*, 05/23/98.

\(^90\) *The Washington Post*, 06/10/98; *Reforma*, 06/09/98

\(^91\) *La Jornada*, 05/29/98.
thousand in 1984, 1986, 1987, 1989\textsuperscript{92}, and more than twenty thousand in 1995 when cultivated hectares were estimated to 21,573, and 9,498 the total amount of the harvested area\textsuperscript{93}. For the same period, eradication of opium poppy plants were more than a thousand hectares since 1967 with some peaks of more than ten thousand during Operation Condor (1975-1977), in the aftermath of Camarena’s murder (1985-1986)\textsuperscript{94}, and continuing in 1995 with 15,389 hectares eradicated, 22,864 cultivated, and 7,270 harvested\textsuperscript{95}.

Cocaine seizures were symbolic – less than ten kilos – until 1970. They represented more than a hundred kilos a year as of 1971, except 1979, 1980 and 1981, but more than four tons as of 1985, more than ten in 1987-1988, more than thirty in 1989 and 1991, almost 50 tons in 1990\textsuperscript{96}, and 46.9 tons in 1994-1996\textsuperscript{97}. Cocaine seizures (1994-1996) in states in order of importance were as follows: Sinaloa (1994); Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Chiapas, Baja California, Sonora, and D.F. (1995); and Tamaulipas, Baja California, Veracruz, Durango, Baja California Sur, and Chihuahua (1996)\textsuperscript{98}. The most important marijuana seizures (1994-1996): Michoacán, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, and Jalisco (producers); Oaxaca, Colima, Sonora, Baja California, and Tamaulipas (trafficking)\textsuperscript{99}. Main poppy producers: Guerrero, Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua, Nayarit in a second level, and, less important, Oaxaca, in the limits with Guerrero and Chiapas\textsuperscript{100}. Heroin trafficking routes (1995-1996): from Jalisco, Guerrero, Nayarit, Sinaloa, Durango and Michoacán to Baja California; from Sinaloa, Nayarit and Michoacán to Sonora; and from Guerrero and Michoacán to Tamaulipas. The detected routes for opium trafficking begin in Guerrero and D.F. to Baja California. Tijuana, Mexicali and Ensenada, in Baja California, are the more dynamic cities in heroin trafficking\textsuperscript{101}. Methamphetamine seizures: Baja California, México and Jalisco, the most important, but also Sonora, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Nayarit, Sinaloa and Durango\textsuperscript{102}. Today, the states of Chihuahua, Guerrero, Durango, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Sonora and Veracruz, produce 99 % of drugs in Mexico\textsuperscript{103}.

The first national addiction survey in Mexico was made in 1988\textsuperscript{104} and financed by the Secretariat of Health and the narcotics bureau of the U.S.A. Embassy in Mexico. Marijuana, inhalants and tranquilizers were the most important drugs, along with tobacco and alcohol. Compared to the consumption in the U.S.A., the rate in Mexico was less than

\textsuperscript{92} See: María Celia Toro, México’s..., op. cit., p.19.
\textsuperscript{94} M. Celia Toro, México’s..., op. cit., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{95} Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México..., op. cit., p. 104.
\textsuperscript{96} M. Celia Toro, México’s..., op. cit., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{97} Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México..., op. cit., p. 99.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., p. 99.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., p. 111.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., p. 103.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 102.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., p. 108.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 113.
one tenth for each drug and age group. A second survey was made in 1993. Urban population aged 12-65 years old (3.9% of the urban population) declared having used illicit drugs, inhalants included, at least once. On the northern border, Tijuana is ranked first in drug use. In 1988, cocaine use was 0.14%, in 1993 it was 0.3%. Mexicali, Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez were the cities where more patients attended by the Centros de Integración Juvenil-CIJ (1995) declared having used cocaine. According to the 1993 survey, heroin use is very low. Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez are mentioned. CIJ statistics include Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali, Chihuahua, Culiacán and Hermosillo. Marijuana use was 2.9% in 1988, and 3.3% in 1993. Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez appeared again as the most important cities. CIJ reports cases, not very sensitive at the national level, of methamphetamine use in Tijuana, Mexicali, Culiacán and Hermosillo. Crack is also rare and has been reported in Baja California, Estado de México and Mexico City.

**Drug traffickers’ corridos**

The history of the business of the century, the social agents who made it possible, their values and their mythology were aspects known only by the drug traffickers themselves, some policemen and few others. Decades of profitable commerce and impunity, or more precisely official protection, as well as the expansion of the drug market and the number of traffickers were the background that inspired some corrido norteño composers to record, in a way no one had ever done before, the modern history of drug trafficking. These corrido composers expressed a point of view generally closer to that of the traffickers themselves. Some composed by request and for monetary reasons, while others simply interpreted common people’s perceptions. Through their songs, they contributed to accelerating the traffickers' process of self-consciousness. The first corrido about drug smuggling dates from the late 40s and was composed by Manuel C. Valdés. Entitled “Carga Blanca”, its subject was heroin smuggling. However, the first traffickers’ corrido ever registered by the Mexico’s Authors and Composers Society was created about 50 years after the prohibition of marijuana and poppy, and was entitled “La Banda del Carro Rojo” (The Red Car Band) by Paulino Vargas. The lyrics mentioned “a hundred kilos of coca”. The combination of music and oral history became the traffickers' socio-odyssey, a symbolic production that challenged the official discourse on drugs and drug traffickers – though not necessarily in a conscious way – and marked the beginning of the end of the State monopoly of such discourse.

The history of men and women working in the drug business along the U.S.A.-Mexico border was the principal subject of the first corridos. Later on, other musical styles such as the tambora sinaloense and the mariachi were adopted as vehicles to tell stories concerning the lives, deaths, adventures, and the ethical codes shared by drug traffickers and other social groups living in the regions where cultivation of poppy and marijuana pre-dated prohibition. Neither local nor national demand was the principal reason for becoming an

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107 Oral communication, James Nicolopoulos, Los Angeles, Ca., 06/05/98.
outlaw or an entrepreneur in the drug business. Those involved produced for the international market, mainly for U.S.A. consumers, due to the high prices paid for marijuana, poppy and their derivatives. In the states of Sonora, Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Durango, the cultivation of these plants became a way of life for many families beginning in the early 1920s, particularly in the mountains. The *corrido* norteño tradition was already a part of their culture, so when new themes appeared they were immediately assimilated as important elements of their social history. In fact, the majority of the most famous Mexican drug traffickers, past and present, were born in the Northwest, predominately in Sinaloa. The history of drug trafficking in Mexico cannot be understood without recognising the role played by Sinaloans in the drug business. A great number of *corridos* are, therefore, related to persons, places and stories from Sinaloa. The tambora, a local and very popular style of music, has also been adopted by composers who have introduced lyrics about drug traffickers. And, last but not least, the exodus of Sinaloans to Jalisco in the mid-seventies as a result of “Operation Condor,” may explain why mariachi, popular music from Jalisco, has also been used to tell drug-related stories.

Given the criminalisation of some drugs traffic, one might assume that traffickers would try to erase every single detail that might reveal their operations. Instead, traffickers as a social group have been notoriously conspicuous, a strategy that could be viewed as self-incriminating, if not suicidal, under other circumstances. The self-confidence this strategy suggests is not a product of the spontaneous discovery of an emblematic identity, rather it is the product of a process of identity construction. The traffickers’ self-consciousness developed in tandem with their exploitation of the miraculous power of money which allowed them to clearly discern what separates the legitimate from the illegitimate, and to gauge the morality of different groups within conventional society.

The traffickers’ atomised and anonymous clandestine status of earlier times has given way to the formation of a wider, more visible and hierarchic group whose illegal economic activities are highly profitable for those who succeed and remain alive and free. *Corridos* do not reflect this period of transition: rather, their lyrics reflect the group’s consolidation. Traffickers’ *corridos* contributed to amplifying and projecting the self-esteem of the group, but they emerged after the traffickers’ activities were already largely tolerated — that is, officially protected — and when traffickers were socially recognised and accepted by other groups. Colombians imported traffickers’ *corridos* tradition to their country, with norteño and mariachi music. They have also adopted some Mexican music traditions.

**Conclusion**

In Mexico, as in many other countries, drugs such as opiates, cocaine and marijuana were commonly used, generally for medical reasons, until the beginning of the twentieth century, when prohibition laws came into being. An eugenic discourse to protect the “race” was developed to convince the general public that the government was acting to preserve them

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from a danger of which they were not conscious. Health officials exaggerated the figures concerning drug addicts, repeating arguments heard in other countries that were based on speculation and not on scientific research. There was also a xenophobic argument in the anti-drug discourse. Government officials accused Chinese immigrants of having imported poppy plants and opium-use into Mexico. Most of the drug traffickers arrested in Mexico in the aftermath of the Harrison Narcotics Act were of Chinese origin. Chinese pogroms during the first three decades of the century reduced their possibilities of consolidating organizations.

Drug trafficking in Mexico began as a response to U.S.A. opium demand. Production areas and border cities were key places where a new social group emerged. The business was profitable enough to attract the interest of mighty politicians. People who tried autonomous strategies for smuggling did not last very long or just survived modestly. Big business needed official protection. Already at the start, drug traffickers depended upon other political economy players. Every time there was a drug scandal, governors from producer or border states were the first in line to be suspected of being involved. Information from Mexican and U.S.A. archives gives support to the idea that newspaper notes identifying northern governors were well-founded. In the logic of the post-revolutionary political system, governors' freedom to do any kind of business, legal or illegal, was limited by the president's will and their own ethical inclinations.

The power of the presidency, the monopoly of politics by the state party, the subordination of the legislative and judicial spheres to the executive, and the lack of organized political opposition, created the conditions for developing drug trafficking from within the power structure. Before the Second World War, not a single suspected governor was ever formally accused or investigated. However, in the aftermath of the war when disputes arose between elite political groups, the drug issue was used to damage a governor's image. Nothing was proved because there were no formal accusations, nor any investigation, just political negotiations. Suspicions remained in the public opinion.

Controlled, protected or tolerated by the political power, drug trafficking continued to function under a new scheme. New social agents were included in an official attempt to reduce drug production and trafficking. There were more players in every camp, and more money. Without any changes in the political system and a growing demand for drugs in the U.S.A., it seems that PJF and DFS agents, as well as the military who had more responsibilities in drug destruction campaigns, were simultaneously fighting to contain drug trafficking, helping smugglers supply the demand, controlling them to restrain their autonomy, and getting a share of the profits – all this in exchange for their mediation role between drug traffickers and the political power, their silence and their disposition to serve as scapegoats to protect their political masters. That mediation scheme was weakened when DEA agent Enrique Camarena was murdered by drug traffickers and police agents who were on their payroll. As a response to U.S.A. pressure, president De la Madrid dismantled the DFS, a very important political elite's protection shield. Mexican Governors and secretaries of state were accused by U.S.A. officials of being involved in Camarena's
murder and drug trafficking. During the Cold War, the DFS espionage services were very useful for the U.S.A. government. For many years DFS illegal activities were never publicly criticised by the American government. U.S.A. drug policy and Camarena's murder changed the honeymoon. However, the PJF structure remained, and so did another important element of the mediation scheme.

The formation of the most important drug trafficking organizations in Mexico can be traced back to the 20s, when prohibition laws provoked an immediate response from poppy cultivators in north-western states, especially in Sinaloa. The region became the centre of drug business and a source of trafficking expertise, a know-how transmitted through generations. Born and raised among poppy and marijuana plants, some north-western peasants and people of urban origin with leadership capabilities were transformed into drug smuggling entrepreneurs (the Sinaloans, for example). The demand for their products, and the police and political protection, multiplied the number of producers in other regions. However, time in the business and expertise, and perhaps more solid and long-lasting political protection, were comparative advantages which made these dealers more powerful than others (a kind of oligopoly), even today and despite the alleged official support to a north-eastern organization (Juan García Abrego's) during president Salinas' administration.

An important poppy and marijuana producer, and a transit country for cocaine, Mexico's illegal drugs users figures are not very impressive when compared to those of the U.S.A., whose demand has usually been the main incentive for Mexican cultivators and traffickers. The two national surveys on addictions and CIJ data show changing and relative growing tendencies in drug use, specially in the most populated cities, producer regions and border cities. Supporting prevention and addiction treatment policies would help to curb the actual trends and keep them at a manageable level. National drug policy considers repression of drug trafficking a more important and urgent issue.

On both sides of the Mexico-U.S.A. border, a popular tradition mixing oral history and a certain style of music developed, starting in the nineteenth century: the corrido. These versified stories about a wide variety of events, usually written from a popular point of view, became a sort of people's newspaper. Drug traffickers' corridos had an immediate effect on the public of northern states when they appeared on the popular music market in the mid-70s. Prohibited for a long time, drug trafficking and traffickers were not perceived for many years as an interesting or legitimate subject for corrido composers, although there were exceptions to the rule. There used to be a certain composers' moral self-control, a conscious or unconscious refusal to talk of an illegal business, its history and social agents. In regions of cultivation, trafficking places and border cities, perceptions were transformed over the years. People learned to live with outlaws, who became a part of the "normal" life. Stories about traffickers told in corridos were also stories of conventional society which simultaneously criticised their criminal behaviour and tolerated their economic and social integration. Traffickers' corridos succeeded when the "normalisation" process was in the stage of consolidation. Economic fortunes, legal entrepreneurial activities, and political relations were elements of social respectability that could be achieved by illegal means.
These social transmutations were visible to many people. Traffickers' *corridos* reproduced parts of this process in a direct and simple language.

According to common sense perception, drug traffickers in Mexico have become so powerful that they have “penetrated” the protective shield of official institutions whose purpose is to fight them. Historical research in the Mexican case does not support the assumption of two separate fields: drug trafficking and its agents, on one side, and the State on the other. Moreover, since the beginning of prohibition, the illegal trade appeared related to powerful political agents in the production and trafficking regions. Cultivators and wholesale smugglers were not autonomous players; their success depended on political protection. They did not buy politicians; rather, politicians obliged them to pay a sort of “tax”. If they didn’t pay, their business was over. The power was on the political side. Politicians decided who, when, where and how. Drug trafficking was supported from within the power structure. How could drug traffickers have penetrated a political structure that created and protected them, a political structure they were subordinated to? They were its creatures.

The strategies of political control on drug trafficking have changed throughout the years. Before the 1940s, governors of producing and trafficking states had the power to control illegal business in their territories. After 1947, anti-drug agents and the military had direct responsibility in fighting traffickers and the possibility of being institutional mediators between traffickers and political power. Neither traffickers nor mediators were autonomous: they were both subordinated to political power. The cracking down of the ancient regime has provoked cascade effects on the different levels of the power structure pyramid. Lethal disputes among the state party political families have disrupted the mechanisms of political control over institutional mediations between traffickers and political power. Institutional mediators (police and military) and traffickers can now be more autonomous than ever and capable of playing for their own interests. A political pact for a democratic transition would help to prevent the negative effects of a collapsing system and increase the probabilities for keeping the social control, under different conditions, of drug trafficking, considering the realistic impossibility of eradicating drugs from the planet and stopping once and forever the curiosity and appetite of human beings for mind-altering substances.