The recent headlines from Mexico are disturbing: U.S. consular official gunned down in broad daylight; Rancher murdered by Mexican drug smuggler; Bomb tossed at U.S. consulate in Nuevo Laredo. This wave of violence is eerily reminiscent of the carnage that plagued Colombia 20 years ago, and it is getting Washington’s attention.

Mexico is in the throes of a battle against powerful drug cartels, the outcome of which will determine who controls the country’s law enforcement, judicial, and political institutions. It will decide whether the state will destroy the cartels and put an end to the culture of impunity they have created. Mexico could become a first-world country one day, but it will never achieve that status until it breaks the grip these criminal organizations have over all levels of government and strengthens its law enforcement and judicial institutions. It cannot do one without doing the other.

Destroying the drug cartels is not an impossible task. Two decades ago, Colombia was faced with a similar—and in many ways more daunting—struggle. In the early 1990s, many Colombians, including police officers, judges, presidential candidates, and journalists, were assassinated by the most powerful and fearsome drug-trafficking organizations the world has ever seen: the Cali and Medellín cartels. Yet

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within a decade, the Colombian government defeated them, with Washington’s help. The United States played a vital role in supporting the Colombian government, and it should do the same for Mexico.

The stakes in Mexico are high. If the cartels win, these criminal enterprises will continue to operate outside the state and the rule of law, undermining Mexico’s democracy. The outcome matters for the United States as well—if the drug cartels succeed, the United States will share a 2,000-mile border with a narcostate controlled by powerful transnational drug cartels that threaten the stability of Central and South America.

THE MEXICAN CONNECTION

Over the last two decades, Mexican drug cartels have acquired unprecedented power to corrupt and intimidate government officials and civilians. Three factors account for their rise: preexisting corruption, the inability of weak law enforcement institutions to counter them, and the demand for illegal drugs in the United States.

Drug trafficking and cross-border smuggling certainly existed in Mexico before the 1980s, but the trade was chiefly confined to marijuana and small quantities of heroin and involved a large number of small trafficking organizations. Almost no cocaine was smuggled through Mexico into the United States before 1984; the vast majority of illegal shipments came through the Bahamas or directly from Colombia to Florida on propeller planes. This changed in the mid-1980s, after the United States shut down the direct flow of cocaine into southern Florida and the Bahamas and made it increasingly difficult to smuggle large amounts of cocaine through the Caribbean. In reaction to Washington’s increasingly successful interdiction strategy, the Colombian cartels forged a connection with major Mexican trafficking organizations. They dispatched a representative to Mexico, Juan Ramón Matta Ballasteros, who came to an agreement with Mexican drug-trafficking organizations in 1984. In exchange for $1,000 per kilogram of cocaine, the Mexican trafficking organizations would smuggle Colombian cocaine into the United States.

Within a few years, 80–90 percent of the cocaine being smuggled into the United States—hundreds of metric tons annually—was
moving through Mexico. After the Mexican connection was forged, Colombian propeller planes—with extra fuel tanks and stripped of seats—began landing on remote airstrips in northern Mexico, carrying 600–800 kilos of cocaine per flight. The smuggling business added greatly to the overall revenues of the major Mexican trafficking organizations. As a result, powerful, more consolidated drug cartels began to emerge in Mexico, including the Gulf, Juárez, Sinaloa, and Tijuana cartels.

At first, the Mexican cartels acted primarily as transporters for the Colombian cartels and were paid in cash. But by the early 1990s, the Colombian cartels were paying them in powder cocaine, which led the Mexican trafficking organizations to create their own distribution networks in the United States and within Mexico, eventually eclipsing the Colombians’ influence. Over the last two decades, these organizations have evolved into vertically integrated, multinational criminal groups. They are headquartered in Mexico, but they have distribution arms in over 200 cities throughout the United States—from Sacramento to Charlotte—and have established a presence in Guatemala and other Central American nations. Their major markets for cocaine are not just in the United States but also in Mexico itself and as far away as Europe. Although their primary business is cocaine and, more recently, methamphetamine, these groups also engage in other criminal activities, including human trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion.

In February 1985, when Enrique “Kiki” Camarena, a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent, was kidnapped, tortured, and killed, the U.S. government began to grasp the full extent of the problem in Mexico. The Guadalajara cartel had murdered Camarena in an attempt to intimidate the United States. The DEA’s investigation of the killing uncovered widespread corruption and complicity in drug trafficking at all levels of the Mexican government. A large portion of the Jalisco state police force, it turned out, was on the payroll of the Guadalajara cartel. Indeed, it was Jalisco state police officers who had abducted Camarena, at the behest of the Guadalajara cartel. The corruption

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extended beyond the state police and into the governor’s office and even into the federal government, including the principal internal security agency, the Federal Directorate of Security. The investigation revealed that the *comandantes* of the Mexican Federal Judicial Police (MFJP), who at the time oversaw all federal police in each state, had been bought off by the drug cartels; *comandante* positions in the northern Mexican states were going for several million dollars each. The “bagman” was a senior official in the attorney general’s office.

In 1986, the Mexican government took action against the Guadalajara cartel, arresting and imprisoning its leaders, Rafael Caro Quintero, Ernesto Fonseca Carillo, and, eventually, Miguel Félix Gallardo. The security directorate was dissolved, and ultimately there was an attempt to create a new federal police agency to replace the disgraced and corrupt MFJP. This effort at reform failed, however, and the Gulf, Juárez, Sinaloa, and Tijuana cartels remained intact.

The problem had become exponentially worse by the 1990s, as the major trafficking organizations began reaping enormous profits from the cocaine trade. Mexico’s one-party political system, which was dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) for 70 years, permitted these major drug cartels to increase their influence and power. This was partially due to entrenched corruption and the government’s lack of accountability. But it was also the result of weak law enforcement agencies, which could not take effective action against major cartel leaders even when the political will to do so existed.

The cartels largely controlled the state and municipal police, and the federal police lacked the skills and authority to carry out effective investigations; they were also compromised by the cartels, which often paid for their housing and supplemented their incomes. In more than one instance, cartel kingpins were tipped off before the federal police could arrest them. Judicial and penal officials, too, were subject to outright bribery, as evidenced by the 2001 jailbreak of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, the head of the Sinaloa cartel, who paid off several prison guards to facilitate his escape.

More than 45,000 troops are currently dedicated to enforcing Calderón’s anticartel policy.
The New Cocaine Cowboys

During the 1990s, the governments of Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo made sporadic attempts to rein in the drug cartels, but they lacked any systematic strategy or sustained effort. To his credit, Zedillo tried to dismantle the Tijuana cartel, an endeavor that involved forming a joint task force with the DEA and U.S. Customs. He also created a national drug-control center with a powerful director to serve as a counterpart to the U.S. drug czar and oversee a federal crackdown. However, not long thereafter, in 1997, evidence was uncovered that the Mexican drug czar, Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was on the payroll of the Juárez cartel.

The Pain in Juárez

A major turning point came in 2000, when the PRI lost power and Vicente Fox of the National Action Party, or PAN, became president. The end of one-party rule was profoundly important for Mexico’s evolution toward true democracy, and it also signaled a new era for the drug cartels. The acquiescence of the federal government could no longer be taken for granted in a democratic state in which most of the public abhorred the drug cartels and the culture of impunity.

As Shannon O’Neil pointed out in the July/August 2009 issue of this magazine, the end of one-party rule set in motion a seismic political shift that undermined the cartels’ cozy relationship with the government and their ability to intimidate its officials. Indeed, things began to change, albeit slowly, under Fox: he took initial steps to clean up the customs service and attempted to reform the federal police, and he dispatched the Mexican military to Nuevo Laredo in 2005 when the Gulf cartel, through its paramilitary assassins, the Zetas, threatened to take total control of the city. Most important, there was a sharp increase in extraditions of drug traffickers to the United States. This trend has accelerated under Felipe Calderón, who became president in December 2006. Before Fox, there had been only six extraditions of Mexican citizens to the United States ever; during Fox’s six-year tenure, there were 133. And since Calderón came to power, there have been 144.

The government’s campaign escalated dramatically after Calderón took office. Consistent with his campaign pledges, he released a
national development plan declaring that his administration’s main goal was to establish the rule of law by confronting organized crime and corruption. Calderón has relied heavily on the Mexican military, one of the country’s few reliable institutions, to combat the drug cartels. One of his first moves as president was to deploy 6,500 Mexican army troops to his home state of Michoacán to curb the violence caused by dueling drug cartels there. More than 45,000 soldiers are currently dedicated to enforcing Calderón’s anticartel policy, many of whom are stationed in Ciudad Juárez, the site of one of the most violent confrontations between rival cartels.

Calderón’s initiatives have begun to destabilize the cartels, and many cartel leaders are now on the run. In December 2009, the Mexican navy—the country’s least corrupt government institution—acting on intelligence, surrounded one of the cartels’ kingpins, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, and killed him and a number of his bodyguards in a shootout in Cuernavaca, south of Mexico City. More recently, units of the newly constituted Mexican Federal Police captured Teodoro García Simental, the kingpin who had taken over the Tijuana cartel after the Mexican government captured the Arellano Félix brothers, the cartel’s former leaders, and crippled their criminal network. Calderón has also taken action to tighten security at Mexican ports and along the country’s southern border in order to disrupt the inflow of cocaine, weapons, and drug precursor chemicals. Although much remains to be done, Mexican authorities have seized over 80 metric tons of cocaine since Calderón took office. The recent seizures of four tons of pseudoephedrine, a precursor chemical used to make methamphetamine, and nearly a ton of cocaine at the ports of Veracruz and Manzanillo are evidence of Mexico’s enhanced interdiction efforts.

Even so, the number of drug-related homicides has risen in the last few years. An estimated 22,000 drug-related murders have occurred since Calderón took office, with nearly 9,000 in 2009 alone. This has led some to conclude that violence in Mexico is out of control. Others have suggested that the country is on the verge of becoming a “failed state” (or, in the words of a 2008 U.S. military report, at risk of “rapid and sudden collapse”). The former is a gross exaggeration, and the latter is simply untrue.
Ninety percent of the homicides have involved members of one drug cartel killing members of another. Most of the rest have been heavily armed cartel members murdering Mexican soldiers or police. Some innocent bystanders have been killed, but they represent a small fraction of the total. Violence in Mexico today is nothing like the carnage that plagued Colombia in the late 1980s and 1990s. Last year, Chihuahua, the state in which Juárez is located, had a homicide rate of 143 per 100,000—one of the worst in the Western Hemisphere, to be sure, yet less than one-third the rate in Medellín during the last years of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel in the early 1990s. Indeed, Mexico’s national homicide rate last year was ten for every 100,000 people, far lower than Brazil’s (25) and Venezuela’s (48). Mexico may be violent, but it is not out of control.

Nor is Mexico a failed state. Most of the drug-related homicides have occurred in just six of Mexico’s 32 states, and the majority of them have been in the state of Chihuahua. The increase in the number of drug-related homicides, although unfortunate, is a sign of progress: a consequence, in part, of government actions that are destabilizing the drug cartels and denying them access to areas in which they used to operate with complete impunity. As a result, the cartels are starting to fight one another. The carnage in Juárez, for example, is largely the result of fighting between the local Juárez cartel and the Sinaloa cartel for control of the Juárez–Chihuahua corridor, one of the primary smuggling routes into the United States. (There was a similar, but worse, increase in violence in Colombia during the death throes of the cartels there.) Once these cartels are broken, public safety and security will follow, as was the case in Colombia. One need only look at Medellín today.

FROM MEDELLÍN TO MICHOACÁN

The situation Mexico faces today is in many ways similar to the one that Colombia confronted 20 years ago. In 1990, two enormously powerful Colombian drug cartels—in Cali and Medellín—dominated the world cocaine trade. Both cartels were made up of three to four large drug-trafficking organizations, each with its own kingpin and organizational structure. The cartels hid their cocaine
labs in remote and jungle regions, where Marxist insurgents provided them cover; in exchange, rebel groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, derived much of their funding from the cartels. In urban areas, the cartels worked by bribing police, politicians, and judges. Those who could not be bribed were intimidated; the cartels threatened to kill them and their families, and often they did. The phrase in Spanish is plata o plomo?—“money or lead?”

Two decades ago, the challenges faced by the Colombian government, even with U.S. support, seemed insurmountable. Colombia was on the verge of failure due to the two quasi-military drug cartels, spiraling rates of political violence, criminality, and an extraordinarily high national homicide rate of 80 per 100,000—eight times Mexico’s current rate. Today, neither cartel poses a threat to the Colombian state; both are gone.

There are several lessons to be drawn from Colombia’s successful campaign. First, since the cartels were vertically integrated, transnational organizations, the campaign against them required the involvement of more than just one country. A multinational approach, with strong support and assistance from the United States, was necessary. The provision of U.S. technical and operational assistance to the Colombian government, in particular the Colombian National Police and the Colombian military, was crucial. Likewise, Mexico’s cartels cannot be eliminated unless they are attacked from both within and outside the country.

Second, the goal must be clear. In Colombia, the objective was to dismantle and destroy the Cali and Medellín cartels—not to prevent drugs from being smuggled into the United States or to end their consumption. Indeed, there are still drug traffickers in Colombia, and cocaine is still produced there, but compared with the old cartels, the trafficking groups there today are smaller, more fragmented, and far less powerful—and, most important, they no longer pose a threat to Colombian national security. From a law enforcement perspective, the problem in Colombia today is manageable. The United States must accept that the goal in Mexico is
similar: the destruction of the large Mexican cartels, nothing more and nothing less.

Third, a divide-and-conquer strategy can be effective. It worked in Colombia, and it can work in Mexico. The Colombian government wisely chose to attack one cartel at a time, rather than fighting a two-front war. The Medellín cartel was obliterated by the end of 1993, and the coup de grâce was the killing of Escobar, a key figure in the cartel. The Colombian government then turned its forces against the Cali cartel, which unraveled after the capture of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers and the Urdinola Grajales brothers and the killing of José Santacruz Londoño, all of which was accomplished by the end of 1996. In less than a decade, the Cali and Medellín cartels, two of the most powerful criminal organizations the world has ever seen, were destroyed. The Colombian government’s more recent successes against armed insurgent groups would not have been possible had the cartels not first been defeated.

Fourth, the United States and Mexico must rely on a proven strategy, such as the “kingpin strategy,” which was used to defeat the Colombian cartels. Success in Colombia hinged on identifying, locating, and capturing the kingpins and key lieutenants of the organizations that made up the Cali and Medellín cartels and then imprisoning them in secure facilities. (Some were killed resisting arrest.) The strategy required attacking every vulnerability of the trafficking organizations at every step of the process: disrupting the cartels’ flows of money and weapons, their ability to acquire drugs and drug precursor chemicals, and their distribution networks, while fully exploiting their communications vulnerabilities. The goal was to weaken these criminal organizations to the point where their leaders and potential future leaders could be captured and removed.

Contrary to popular belief, not anyone can effectively run a large, multinational drug-trafficking organization. Removing the kingpin and his potential successors is the death knell for such organizations.
In Colombia, the extradition to the United States of cartel leaders and potential leaders was therefore an indispensable part of the kingpin strategy. Focusing the efforts of various U.S. agencies on the same targets made the operations more effective, and using polygraph tests and other anticorruption measures to vet Colombian law enforcement officers helped ensure that the U.S. intelligence shared with Colombian counterparts was not compromised.

Fifth, law enforcement and judicial institutions must be aggressively reformed. Long-term success in Colombia required strengthening the capacity and integrity of the country’s policing, prosecutorial, and judicial institutions, allowing criminals to be captured, prosecuted, and penalized. Before these reforms, Colombian judges lived in fear, and hundreds of investigative magistrates were killed when they did not succumb to bribery. With significant assistance from Washington, Mexico, like Colombia, could better protect its judges, prosecutors, and witnesses from corruption and intimidation. Moreover, the Colombian National Police worked to hire better-vetted and better-educated officers, pay them more, rotate personnel, and introduce the concept of internal-affairs investigations. Colombian laws were changed to permit prosecution for conspiracy and money laundering and to allow the use of informants and lawful wiretapping to produce evidence usable in court.

Sixth, the limits on the usefulness of the military must be understood. The Colombian military played an important part in the battle against the Cali and Medellín cartels, attacking and destroying remote cocaine labs and battling FARC guerrillas and other paramilitary groups in the countryside. Yet it did not play a decisive role in the defeat of the cartels—the Colombian National Police did. Militaries are ill suited to carry out the actions necessary to ultimately bring down criminal organizations. These include investigations to support prosecutions, the recruitment of informants, and the use of electronic surveillance to gather evidence.

In Mexico today, the military is taking the lead in the war against the drug cartels. They are doing so out of sheer necessity, but it is a stopgap solution. The country desperately needs to reform and overhaul its hundreds of separate state and municipal police forces. It will be several more years before the Mexican Federal Police are...
strong enough to take over this war from the army. And even then, the military will likely have to assist the police in confronting heavily armed paramilitary units of the cartels.

As Washington sends money south as part of the Merida Initiative, an effort to combat crime and drug trafficking in Mexico, it must be careful not to focus too much on military assistance and neglect other, more effective forms of aid that are essential to success. In Colombia, almost all the initial U.S. aid came in the form of military equipment, giving the Colombian government the erroneous impression that the cartels could be destroyed using military force alone. The United States has made the same mistake in Mexico. Virtually all of the first $300 million of Merida funding—25 percent of the total so far—went to military equipment. Some of this equipment is useful, of course, but it is more important in the long run for the United States to concentrate its assistance on the development, training, and professionalization of Mexico’s law enforcement officers. At the federal level, Mexico desperately needs to create a Mexican equivalent of the FBI, together with a real anticorruption and internal-affairs investigative capacity that can gain credibility through publicized prosecutions. At the state level, Mexico needs new police officers who are paid well enough to make them less susceptible to bribery. The best solution may be to abolish the municipal police departments altogether and have reformed state police agencies, comprised of officers trained at a national police academy, take over policing in the cities.

Finally, extradition is vital. Trial and imprisonment in the United States was the only thing that the Colombian drug traffickers truly feared. Once weakened, several cartel kingpins surrendered to Colombian authorities rather than face extradition. Although the Cali and Medellín cartels were destroyed in less than a decade, this could have been accomplished faster if costly errors, such as the temporary abolition of extraditions, had not been made along the way. (Colombian traffickers bribed Colombian lawmakers to secure passage of the extradition ban.)

ENDGAME

Although the Colombian drug cartels of 20 years ago were even more powerful than the Mexican cartels of today, Colombia had some
advantages that Mexico does not have. Colombia is one of the oldest continuous democracies in Latin America, whereas Mexico’s democracy is still evolving. Colombia has a strong central government, whereas Mexico is a federal republic, with all the complexities and fragmentation that entails. It is far easier to reform and reorganize one national police force, as was done in Colombia, than to reform and reorganize two federal, 32 state, and over 1,500 municipal police agencies, as will be necessary in Mexico.

Still, virtually all the key lessons learned from the defeat of the Colombian cartels in the 1990s are applicable to the current battle against the Mexican cartels. Mexico’s government is already reforming and professionalizing its federal police. Hiring standards and vetting have improved, and some anticorruption best practices are being adopted. And at long last, Mexico will soon have a federal police authority to parallel the U.S. Border Patrol, which will permit rapid exchanges of information between the United States and Mexico and provide better border security for both nations. The Calderón government is shoring up Mexico’s own porous southern border, has plans to reform and transform its customs service, and is upgrading its information technology infrastructure, which will permit intelligence sharing through secure databases.

For its part, the United States must do more to rally its own law enforcement community around a common strategy to be sure the various Washington agencies involved play their assigned roles. Specifically, the United States should use much of the remaining Merida funding to help build the capacity of the Mexican federal and state police and develop a command-and-control center for intelligence sharing and communications. Washington should also improve its efforts to stanch the flow of weapons and cash across the United States’ border into Mexico. A small binational group is needed to target, coordinate, and oversee the rapid implementation of a kingpin-style strategy. And as part of a longer-term effort, both nations, but especially the United States, should seek to reduce the domestic demand for drugs through education and treatment programs.

There are less than three years left in Calderón’s presidency, and victory in the war against the drug cartels may not be achieved
before his term ends. (Under the Mexican constitution, presidents are limited to a single six-year term.) There is a very real risk that the Mexican public will grow weary of the violence and turn against his strategy of defeating the cartels. Indeed, the former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castañeda has called for the government to enter into a “tacit deal” with some or all of the drug cartels, under which the government would allow them to operate their illegal businesses with impunity in exchange for curbing public violence.

The United States knows from its own experience with organized crime that such a pact would be a serious mistake. The public will never believe in the rule of law if the government itself permits certain criminal groups to operate above it. Not only would this approach cause widespread public cynicism; it would also result in the return of large-scale graft, one of the very things that Calderón is trying to eliminate. It is the government that should enforce the peace and public safety, not organized criminal enterprises.

Victory can be achieved. Mexico’s drug cartels are becoming desperate. If Mexico takes the lessons of Colombia to heart and continues to show strong leadership and firm political will, it can, with U.S. assistance, rid itself of the cartels for good.