

Cocaine's Long March North, 1900–2010

Paul Gootenberg

ABSTRACT

This essay charts the entanglements and “blowback” effects of U.S. policy toward Latin American drug exports over the last century as the backdrop to today’s cascading drug violence in northern Mexico. The history of cocaine reveals a series of major geopolitical shifts (closely related to U.S. interdictionist drug war policies) that bring drug commodity chains, illicit trafficking centers, and conflicts, over the long run, closer to the United States. It analyzes shifts from initial legal cocaine and small-time postwar smuggling of the central Andes to the concentrating 1970s–1990s “cartel” epicenter in northern Andean Colombia, to the 1990s political shift north to Mexican transshipment and organizational leadership. Violence around cocaine has intensified at every step, and the present conflict portends another shift in the chain.

Behind the sensationalized headlines, national security panic, and grim statistics on escalating drug violence along the Mexican-U.S. border (now nearing fifty thousand killings since 2007) lies a hidden history of entanglements of U.S. drug policy across the Western Hemisphere. The story is deeper than Mexican president Felipe Calderón’s risky “war” against powerful and ruthless Mexican drug organizations. And the story goes deeper than the lament of many U.S. liberals (and some libertarians) about the chronic failures of U.S. drug prohibitions—especially the “drug wars” declared against Latin American traffickers starting in the late 1960s, and ramped up amid the “crack” cocaine frenzy of the 1980s, a lament that calls for decisive change from the current policy of overseas drug interdiction.

The deeper story, illustrated here by the longer history of U.S. relationships with cocaine, is one in which—to use the term popularized after 9/11—the “blowback” of previous attempts to contain drug trades has had two critical effects: first, to make drug commerce increasingly more illicit, violent, and menacing to U.S. interests; and second, to shift the commodity chains and centers of menacing trades closer and closer to drug consumers within U.S. borders (Johnson 2004). Like the CIA with terrorism, the DEA and its precursors unleashed their own demons with a global strategy of drug militarization.

Cocaine, once a minuscule, benign, and legal trade in a distant corner of the Andes, under rising U.S. pressures first became an illicit

trade by the 1950s, which then drove the startling rise of the Colombian cartels of the 1980s (Gootenberg 2008). By the mid-1990s, further U.S. pressures drove the drug's profit-leading wholesale trafficking to northern Mexico, the prelude to the current showdown between druglords and the Mexican state. Each stage in this progression has seen a dramatic expansion of both drug supplies and drug-related conflict and violence, and each stage has propelled the geography of the drug business further north. Illicit flows are notoriously difficult and political to measure (and hence all the statistics deployed here are very rough); and along the way to the present crisis, Mexican drug exporters have diversified in and out of marijuana, methamphetamine, and heroin (Reuter 2004, on estimation problems). That said, about one-half of today's world usage of recreational cocaine is still done in the United States, and expenditures for pricey "coke" account for about half the \$80 billion in revenues in illegal U.S. drug sales (UNDCP 2008, 76). Ninety percent of U.S. cocaine now flows across the long and intractable Mexican-U.S. border, handled by homegrown trafficker groups, who reap an estimated \$23 billion from drug exports.

Picture the dimensions of this boom in historical perspective. Legal cocaine exports of the early twentieth century peaked at about ten (metric) tons around 1900 and fell to under half a ton by 1950, when cocaine first became criminalized in South America. The new trickle of coke smuggled from the Andes to the United States reached about a ton again by 1970, the year after President Richard Nixon's declaration of the "war on drugs" and three years before formation of the expansive, globetrotting bureaucracy of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). By 1980, rising Colombian refiners and smugglers of cocaine were moving about one hundred tons of the drug north, a sum that grew tenfold during the cocaine boom of the 1980s to an estimated capacity of one thousand tons of illicit drug.

Today's criminal capacity for illicit coke, according to varied UN and U.S. estimates, hovers between 900 and 1,400 metric tons, or more than one hundred times the peak of legal cocaine marketed in 1900 (Gootenberg 2008, 306, 313–14). Considering this staggering growth in the drug's supply, at base, as smugglers outwit the rising risks of the U.S. interception war (and from the wild competition sparked by the risk premium of banned drugs), it is hardly surprising that the retail price of cocaine has plummeted continuously since the 1970s, at least until 2007. This long trend was the exact opposite of the DEA's stated goal of driving drug prices up and out of the range of casual users or addicts at home. Liberal critics of U.S. drug policies are right that overseas interventionist strategies have utterly failed to stem the flow of drugs north, but the blowback and damage they inflict on the people and politics of Latin America carry worse consequences there than our mere failure at domestic control.

This article sketches four major periods and geographies in cocaine's long march north, shifts that were all produced by ill-conceived U.S. drug policies foisted on the entire hemisphere. At each point, historians must wonder (and now carefully research) what tunnel-blinded drug policymakers in Washington were really thinking would be the results of their foreign interventions, since across the previous century, such pressures have only made for larger and thornier drug problems instead. This is the crucial backdrop for understanding both the mayhem in Mexico today and, just as important, a now open Latin American challenge to a long U.S. hegemony in hemispheric drug policies.

This article traces the movement of Andean cocaine north—the most volatile and profitable drug flow of the past century—but readers should bear in mind two other historically significant and autonomous sites of drug export culture in the Americas. Cuba, from the start of its neo-colonial incorporation into the U.S. sphere after 1898, became a smuggler's paradise: bootlegging, mobsters, gambling, and sex and drug trades enjoyed the twin advantages of location and corruptible regimes. (Panama has also served as this kind of neocolonial or transnational illicit zone.) By the 1950s, Havana had become a vibrant taste-incubating and distribution center for hemispheric drugs, especially cocaine. However, the Cuban revolution of 1959 expelled *en masse* the national drug gangster class and effectively ended Cuba's role in illicit commodity flows (Cirules 2004; Sáenz Rovner 2008).

Mexico also has a long history of drug smuggling to the United States, not surprising, given the strong pull of U.S. demand across the two-thousand-mile border and a longstanding complicity of local and policing officials in black markets. Starting with the first federal U.S. drug prohibitions (1914), northern Mexico sprouted a number of shifting drug export circuits: banned patent drugs, alcohol during 1920s Prohibition, opiates in the 1940s, marijuana in the 1960s, heroin in the 1970s. Some continuities exist between these drug networks and cultures, but it was not until the advent of massive cocaine transshipment roles during and after the mid-1980s that Mexican druglords in states like Sinaloa began to flex the kind of power and scale seen today, and transformed the Mexican border into what anthropologist Howard Campbell terms a permanent “drug war zone” (Campbell 2009).

THE RISE AND FALL OF LEGAL COCAINE: 1885–1947

The Andean region's cocaine boom of the late twentieth century was actually founded on the remains of a defunct legal economy of cocaine, which bequeathed the techniques and regional networks in the birth of an illicit trade. Cocaine production, mainly for anesthesia and other

medicinal purposes, passed through two phases: its takeoff from 1885 to 1910, promoted by German pharmaceutical firms, U.S. consumers and authorities, and Peruvian medical and regional elites; and its steep contraction from 1910 to the late 1940s, due to colonial plantation rivals in Dutch Java and Japanese Formosa, shrinking medicinal usage, and the initial impact of U.S. and League of Nations drives to proscribe cocaine as a “narcotic.”

In a dramatic twist, after 1905 the United States, one of the drug’s avid boosters, became—after an early panic about popular drug use and pharmaceutical firm abuses—cocaine’s militant global foe. Unencumbered by large, formal colonial interests, pioneer U.S. drug authorities also became universal champions of eradicating the drug at its origins. Until the 1940s, however, despite rising informal sway in the Andes, the United States was not able to convince or coerce producer nations of the evils of coca and cocaine. The industry in Peru, based on a local technology for making cocaine sulfates out of indigenous coca leaf (crude cocaine, a direct antecedent of today’s *pasta básica de cocaína*, PBC), shrank to an east-central Andean regional hub: Huánuco Province, tied to Amazonian coca fields of the Upper Huallaga Valley. (Bolivia also raised much coca during this era for domestic indigenous consumption, which never entered into “industrialization” or significant export.) At its production peak in 1905, Peru exported some ten metric tons of semiprocessed cocaine, which fell to its nadir after 1945 at less than half a ton.

This precursor drug culture had three major legacies. First, legal cocaine was a perfectly peaceful enterprise, save for sporadic regional caudillos living off the trade and some early *enganche* (coerced) labor on the frontier coca plantations of the high tropical “eyebrow of the jungle.” Second, neither in its rise nor its fall did a legal cocaine economy like Peru’s spawn border-crossing contraband networks (even if the recreational pleasures of coke and pharmacy theft rings were widely known in the United States and Europe). A multipolar cocaine world prevailed between 1910 and 1945, when some nations, like the United States, successfully banned and dried up nonmedicinal cocaine use, and others, like Peru and the Netherlands, openly made it and tolerated the drug. This legal diversity did not spawn price incentives for either a black market or violent competition. Third, a shriveled and antiquated cocaine business survived as the basis of regional life in rustic Huánuco, which left the province, by the end of World War II, as the world’s last bastion of cocaine-making lore (Gootenberg 2008).

THE BIRTH OF ILLICIT COKE, 1947–1973

Following World War II, the United States emerged, on a variety of fronts, as the uncontested power in world drug affairs, with its vision of

full drug eradication magnified through new UN drug agencies such as the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND). Combined with a wave of compliant Cold War regimes in much of Latin America, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) and the State Department were finally able to achieve their longstanding goal of criminalizing South American cocaine (and on paper, even Andean coca leaf): in Peru by 1948, and Bolivia, disrupted by its 1952 revolution, in 1961.

The immediate impact of cocaine's full criminalization, which was accompanied by a secret 1950s FBN campaign against Andean cocaine, was the birth, dispersion, and growth of an illicit culture and circuit of cocaine production. Geographically, illicit cocaine was a decentralized, fluid, grassroots movement, in which modest "chemists," smugglers, and club owners emerged out of diverse social worlds, including exile and cultural diaspora, and connected to establish a string of new drug scenes, trails, and way stations across South America and the Caribbean. Cocaine was not the product of international mafia rings or criminal cartels. By the early 1960s, these ever more elusive and experienced smugglers were joined by a hardy new social class: an entrenching peasantry in illicit coca production. Highland peasants, marginalized during the U.S.-sponsored "development decade" of the 1960s, began migrating in force to lowland Bolivia and eastern Peru, lured by the mirage of post-war Amazonian road-building and modernization projects. The connection of a dedicated, specialized smuggling class to a steady, socially defined supply base among Andean peasants spelled cocaine's unstoppable eruption in the decades ahead.

Policing archives reveal some larger patterns and point to the influence of Cold War politics (Gootenberg 2007). The illicit drug was born in the same Huánuco-Upper Huallaga region of eastern Peru when in 1948-49, the rightist, pro-U.S. military regime of General Manuel Odría cracked down on the country's last legal factories, jailing a number of manufacturers (whom he brandished as left-wing subversives) and sending others to clandestine outlets. The technique they passed into illicit hands was the vintage jungle Peruvian "crude cocaine," which hired peasants could cheaply and easily adopt with developmental chemicals like kerosene and cement lime. By the early 1950s, smugglers carried this Andean PBC out to refiners of powder cocaine (HC1) along two key transshipment routes: a Caribbean passage via Havana (an infamous hub of Latin American mobsters) and northern Chile, where Valparaíso's connected Middle Eastern merchant clans moved coke up the west coast via Panamanian and Mexican hideouts and intermediaries. Meanwhile, the draconian, U.S.-backed cocaine repression in Peru, and the lack of authority and direct U.S. sway in revolutionary Bolivia, meant that the clandestine production of PBC swiftly spread to neighboring Bolivia, which, during the 1950s, became the true incubation site for

illicit cocaine, with dozens of small coke “labs” scattered throughout its territory.

By the early 1960s, coke was found almost everywhere in the hemisphere, with thriving user scenes and smuggling across Argentina and Brazil and a nascent (if still typically Latino or Afro-American) consumer base in cities like New York and Miami. Two Cold War turning points accelerated the spread of cocaine. Fidel Castro’s 1959 social revolution in Cuba (and Cuba’s subsequent political conflicts with the United States) meant the swift expulsion of Havana’s nascent cocaine trafficker class, who took their skills and connections with them to South America, Mexico, and sometimes directly to Miami and New Jersey. These rightist exiles (not Castro, as claimed in the era’s anticommunist propaganda) formed the first professional international cocaine-trafficking class. Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to regain authority over the shaky leftist MNR revolution in Bolivia led, by 1961, to a joint antinarcotics campaign in that country (and by 1964, to a conservative militarizing shift), which worked to drive thousands of peasants and vanishing dealers into inaccessible coca frontiers in the lowland Chapare, Santa Cruz, and Beni regions.

That year, 1961, was also the year of the universal UN Single Convention drug treaty, which for the first time, internationally codified the long-term U.S. vision of eradicating Andean coca cultures. Meanwhile, the United States, with drug authorities quietly panicking about their inability to stop the new drug, launched a slew of secret Latin American policing summits (1961–64) and INTERPOL and UN antidrug missions and raids. All such attempts at repression further scattered the drug and hardened its consolidating smuggler class. By the late 1960s, however, the rise of U.S.-backed “bureaucratic” military regimes in nations like Brazil and Argentina drove most long distance cocaine routing through one country: the continent’s one vibrant democracy, Chile, where the breakup of the original 1950s northern Huassaf clan led to a wildly competitive export business, linked to the growing supply of Bolivian and, once again, Peruvian coca paste.

By 1970, U.S. drug authorities were deeply alarmed about the rise of this new illicit commodity chain—even if it was kept out of public purvey—which two decades of frantic containment efforts had only intensified. Yet two aspects of initial cocaine culture in the 1960s should, in retrospect, have calmed the fears of U.S. officials. First, this was a nonviolent trade: the bottom-up, low-stakes, cooperative networking that created cocaine was a peaceful affair, akin to many traditional forms of South American border contraband. Cubans and Chileans were not killing each other on the street for product or territory. Second, it was geographically contained in far-off reaches of South America: in isolated deforested patches of eastern Peru and Bolivia, and mainly smuggled out of antipodal Chile. Blowback from U.S. meddling aside, cocaine was

a homegrown South American affair, which also helps to explain its long intractability to outside forces.

THE RISE AND DEMISE OF COLOMBIAN CARTELS, 1973–1995

Before the 1970s, Colombia, as just seen, played no systematic role in South American cocaine trades, though the country had wily entrepreneurs, regional contraband traditions, rising *marimbero* marihuana sales from the Caribbean north coast, and a legacy of horrific everyday violence from the 1950s. Cocaine's unknown and politically driven shift to the lagging Colombians came with the U.S. regime of Richard Nixon (1969–74).

Two Cold War events propelled cocaine geography north. The first, a byproduct of Nixon's and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's invigorated anticommunist crusade abroad, was General Augusto Pinochet's September 1973 military coup in Chile. Besides brutalizing Chilean democracy, Pinochet, to win favor with Nixon and his newly formed DEA, launched, by late 1973, a draconian campaign against the major Chilean cocaine traffickers, all of whom were quickly jailed or expelled. Colombians had been recruited since the early 1970s as small-scale, anonymous mules for Chilean traffickers; the immediate impact of Pinochet's crackdown was to shift the route of peasant coca paste from the Huallaga Valley (closer to Colombia) and lowland Bolivia north through the Amazonian border town of Leticia and into central Colombia. Within a few years, pioneering Medellín smugglers like Pablo Escobar and the Ochoa brothers had not only restructured the entire trade but, as refiners and wholesale smugglers, had dramatically expanded its scale and reach.

The second event was Nixon's politically inspired 1969 declaration of "war" against drugs, primarily aimed against harmless marijuana (the "opiate" of antiwar students and youth culture) and heroin (a true opiate feared among returning Vietnam veterans and the scapegoat for the "black" crime wave sweeping decayed U.S. cities) (see Massing 1998).¹ The crackdowns on these drugs—1970's Operation Intercept aerial attack and blockade of the Mexican border, and the squeeze against the "French Connection" heroin trade—made a perfect market opening for Andean cocaine, just entering early 1970s U.S. culture as a glamorous and pricy "soft drug." Cocaine was safer and more profitable to smuggle, so weed importers from Colombia, in Miami, and even northern Mexico made a rapid switch in product lines.

Much ink has been spilled over the Colombian cartels—an ideological misnomer for such energetic regional and family-based capitalist enterprises—but little is actually known about their origins. Once pro-

pelled to Colombia, cocaine thrived on a number of new locational, political, and sociological advantages in places like Medellín, not coincidentally the nation's declining entrepreneurial epicenter (Roldán 1999; Thoumi 1992). Empresarios like Escobar, the Ochoas, and Carlos Lehder seized the advantage of cross-Caribbean island-hopping wholesale transport routes (in aircraft and speedboats, big and small); a Colombian diaspora spread abroad in places like Miami and Queens, New York; and DEA attention lagged (cocaine was still perceived as an elite "soft" drug). By 1975, the trade had swollen to an estimated four tons, and by 1980 Colombians were funneling some one hundred tons of cocaine into the United States, driving down the drug's price, winning millions of avid customers, and employing thousands more in their far-flung networks.

Colombian exporters gathered into three major regional groupings: Medellín, Central (Bogotá), and Cali (de Valle), the third a bustling new city conveniently located near the Pacific port of Buenaventura, the export developed there by families such as the Rodríguez-Orejuelas and the Herreras. Until the early 1990s, however, Medellín, under Escobar's strongarm, charismatic leadership, handled some 80 percent of the trade, more than half from coca paste grown, produced, and imported from eastern Peru's Huallaga, the rest from lowland Bolivia.

By the mid-1980s, cocaine had affected the lives of some 22 million U.S. users. Sliding prices, racially tagged discount markets (such as African-American "crack"), and the drug's growing aura of violence transformed cocaine into the top drug evil of U.S. drug warriors, the press, and the public. Propagated under Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, this prolonged political hysteria about cocaine led to the dramatic 1980s militarization of the overseas war against the Andean coca bush. However, reliable state allies were difficult to find in the still drug-tolerant regimes of Peru, Colombia, and especially Bolivia during the García Meza "narcodictatorship" of the early 1980s, a corrupt, rightist regime rooted in drugs. The escalation of hemispheric interdiction campaigns in Peru (direct military aid and an active adviser firebase in the Huallaga), Bolivia (Operation Blast Furnace; U.S.-trained UMOPAR antidrug forces), Colombia (a forced extradition pact by the late 1980s), and Panama (culminating in the 1989 invasion and ouster of former U.S. ally Manuel Noriega) failed to slow cocaine (for grounded study, see Malamud-Goti 1992). Just the opposite: U.S. pressures led to enhanced trafficker smuggling skills and business verve, to a doubling of Amazonian coca between 1982 and 1986 (as crop insurance against captured lots), and to a nosedive in the drug's price from \$60,000 to \$15,000 per kilo (wholesale, as registered in South Florida) across the decade as a whole. These U.S. pressures also led to new geographies of cocaine and to the trade's growing political and business violence.

Cocaine's genealogy of violence still needs to be isolated from that issue's sensationalism. The precursor Andean trades up to the 1970s were relatively pacific. But as monetary stakes and competition rose exponentially during the mid-1970s to millions per shipment, Colombians in particular drew on a well of strategic violence. It was even deployed by *sicarios* (hitmen) in the United States against the remnant of rival Cuban distributors. By the early 1980s, Miami was engulfed in open gang warfare as turf battles broke out among various "cocaine cowboys," along with a drug market boom and a crime wave that authorities desperately sought to contain (inspiration for the era's iconic TV series *Miami Vice*).

In Colombia, it seems, most violence was still a defensive tool associated with illicit trades: to build impunity against the police and DAS security forces and against informers in all their ranks, though monetary inducements to cooperate still normally sufficed at all political levels. Traffickers, like any rising entrepreneurial class, at first sought broader legitimacy, running for office (Escobar briefly served as a new Liberal senator), financing candidates, offering truces and fiscal gifts to the state, and supplying local social services and charity, especially in Medellín. But a mixture of U.S. pressure, a rising international spotlight on cocaine, and Colombian anxieties about narco "infiltration" of the state led to a dramatic breakdown of this equilibrium. After 1984, drug traffickers' relative impunity faded, starting with Justice Minister Lara Bonilla's ouster of the politically ambitious Escobar and others from the political arena. Traffickers responded with a tsunami of real and symbolic attacks on the Colombian state: kidnappings, terror bombings, and assassinations of judges, national politicians, journalists, and other political foes, including the audacious killing of Lara Bonilla himself.

Already awash in political violence (including a rising inland sea of guerrillas and paramilitaries), Colombia became the world murder capital. Between 1980 and 1990, Medellín (anticipating Ciudad Juárez's fate today) saw a spike in homicides from 730 to 5,300 per annum. Escobar turned to his Prisco gang of shock troops, and the state responded with ever-widening emergency powers against the mayhem. Open war broke out between the Medellín cartel and the state after 1987 when the United States launched its judicial kingpin "extradition" policy with Colombia and deeper involvement in the drug war. The Barco-Bush offensive betrayed trust in Colombia's own judicial process and security forces and undercut national initiatives for a political compromise solution to drug power. A few symbolic victories registered, like the capture and rendition of Lehder; and other figures, such as the Ochoas, accepted amnesty and state authority. Colombians, not Americans, paid the high price in blood and deteriorating human rights, including, in late 1993, the targeted killing of the popular fugitive Escobar (Guillermoprieto 1995, chaps. 1, 4; Kirk 2004).

If there is any lesson for Mexico today, the early 1990s war against the Medellín and other cartels did not really “work.” What it mainly did was shift the locus of action from that besieged city to Cali, where the rival cartels next thrived, while diverting the routing of cocaine north away from the Caribbean Basin. Indeed, many observers read the campaign as a tacit alliance between the Colombian state and cooperative low-key dealers of Cali against wildcard figures like Escobar. And as deftly illustrated by criminologist Michael Kenney, U.S. intervention and drug repression in 1990s Colombia (including the subsequent late-1990s crackdown on Cali organizations) ultimately led to more effective drug-trafficking organizations. Sellers “learned” and “adapted” far faster than their global pursuers in hostile times, and developed sleeker, far more anonymous, efficient, and fluid smuggling networks (Kenney 2007). Instead of a few highly visible regional cartels, Colombia now hosts some six hundred well-camouflaged drug export networks, more cellular “boutique” *cartelitos*. These have diversified with global export strategies (to Brazil, Africa, Europe), have branched into complementary drugs (heroin in the 1990s, now counterfeit pharmaceuticals), and have upgraded technologies (high tech counterintelligence, improved coca processing, homemade submarines). Part of trafficker camouflage is downplaying the politically edged violence of the past.

Before this forced Colombian decentralization, two other drug war repressive measures worked to shift the geography of cocaine. During the early to mid-1980s, alarmed by the explosion of trafficking, money laundering, and flagrant gang violence in Dade County, Florida—the main entry point for Colombian cocaine—the DEA and Washington generally concentrated interdiction efforts on the South Florida coastline, with offensives such as Operation Swordfish and the formation of an integrated military-style Joint Florida Task Force command. The latter involved more than two thousand agents, headed by then-vice president George H. W. Bush. Similar 1980s operations closed flagrant Caribbean transshipment bases in the Bahamas. Sophisticated radar, interdiction aircraft, and aggressive naval patrols eventually prevailed—you can indeed intercept and shoot up supplies by sea and air—and so by the late 1980s, Colombians were actively disinvesting from the Caribbean-Florida corridor.

For rising Cali interests, the 1992 bust of key courier Harold Ackerman decisively exposed their networks. What evolved, however, via Cali, was a rapid thrust to alternative passage via Panama, Central America, and ultimately northern Mexico, whose complex overland connections to the United States (and the byzantine political landscape of the waning PRI decade) made detection and prevention practically impossible. What remained of Caribbean cocaine flowed through Haiti, the closest “failed state” to U.S. borders (particularly after the anti-Aristide

intervention), where an avaricious Duvalier-era military caste ran smuggling operations, and where today some 10 to 15 percent of shipments to the United States are still handled (Chepesiuk 2003, 177–83; Zimmerman 2006; Fountain 2010).

This mid-1980s shift (allegedly brokered by the Honduran go-between Juan Matta Ballesteros with the Mexican Amado Carrillo Fuentes) gave a powerful boost to nascent Mexican druglords. In time, instead of taking cash for their risky operations, Mexicans began to demand shares of loot in cocaine, and started on their own lucrative wholesale and retail drug outlets across the U.S. border and shores. By 2000, the 80 to 90 percent of cocaine that originally had passed from Medellín and then Cali through Florida had transformed into a comparable ratio moving up Central American coasts into northern Mexico. Later, U.S. “drug czars” no doubt pined for the easy days of pinpointing the air and sea lanes between Medellín and South Florida.

Another structural change of the late 1990s was pyrrhic successes against the original producers of illicit cocaine: peasants and middlemen in eastern Peru and Bolivia. During the mid-1990s, U.S. pressures, and compliant rightist regimes, finally led to visible decreases in illicit coca there, after two decades of unrelenting coca expansion. In Peru, the increasingly authoritarian Fujimori-Montesinos regime, alarmed by the lucrative stronghold established by ruthless Maoist Sendero Luminoso guerrillas among harassed Huallaga *cocaleros*, adopted a stringent policy of suppression. It included on-the-ground militarization of the region and the CIA-assisted “shootdown” policy against small aircraft flying out to Colombia. (It hardly mattered that ex-CIA asset Montesinos was simultaneously extorting drug monies and trading arms with both Escobar and the FARC). This tactic effectively broke the long-active Colombian “air bridge,” though Peruvian peasant alienation did not ebb.

In Bolivia, the U.S.-funded anti-coca Plan Dignidad finally slashed coca paste exports. But this campaign left in its wake the militant pro-coca nationalist movement that would eventually propel ex-coca grower Evo Morales to the presidency in 2003; so in another form of blowback, the country has openly defied U.S. coca imperialism ever since. Yet these two temporary victories (as cocaine is now returning after a decade’s lapse to both original Andean lowlands) had a paradoxical impact: swiftly driving coca production to Colombia, where, by the late 1990s, nimble emergent trafficking groups were at work on a stronger national coca-cocaine industry. For two decades, Colombian middlemen in Medellín and Cali were content to exploit, in a clear spatial division of labor, central Andean peasantries in Peru and Bolivia for the raw material of smuggled coca paste. Outsourcing across borders helped lower their business risks.

Then, quite rapidly, Colombia, a country with scant indigenous coca leaf traditions, emerged as the world's largest coca grower. Thousands of peasants, often assisted by rural militias, fled to southern tropical frontiers like Putumayo and Caquetá, as traffickers introduced improved alkaloid-rich strains of the bush to colonists new to coca culture. Colombia was thus transformed into a vertically integrated agroindustrial exporter of cocaine, and by the millennium, more than three-quarters of the cocaine sold in the United States was "100 percent Colombian" in origin. Rampant violence, spearheaded by now virtually indistinguishable antidrug and antiguerrilla operations, echoed throughout Colombia's hot coca lands. The global supply of coca and cocaine continued, with barely a blip, its upward trend. Concentrated in Colombia by 2000, coca-cocaine had decisively marched another step north from its central Andean birthplace.

Given this tempting big target in Colombia, the denouement of these processes was the 1999 Plan Colombia, instituted in his final year by Democratic president Bill Clinton and later eagerly embraced in Bogotá as a de facto strategic alliance by security-minded Liberal president Alvaro Uribe. A massive aid package was funneled into helicopter gunships; an integrated, radical plan for coca eradication (aiming for a 50 percent reduction); "alternative development"; and the advance of the Colombian state (i.e., military or related *paras*) into formerly contested territories.

Much is still debated about Plan Colombia—the costs in human rights include as many as four million internal refugees, versus visible gains against urban crime and an ancient leftist insurgency—but one outcome is absolutely clear. As a drug policy, it has failed to stem the cocaine trade, which is, globally, as massive as ever. Over the past decade, more than \$6 billion of aid transformed Colombia into the largest U.S. aid recipient outside the Middle East, yet in 2007, more cocaine—almost one thousand metric tons—was placed on the drug's global market than in the decade before (UNDCP 2008, Sec. 1.3). This translates into approximately six hundred tons from Colombia, three hundred from Peru, and one hundred from Bolivia, although this picture is also muddled by a higher percentage of drugs (up to 40 percent now) intercepted before entering the United States (UNDCP 2008, Sec. 1.3, esp. 67–68).² Only now is this trend in flux.

Intensive eradication strategies aimed directly at southeastern Colombia, including ecologically perilous crop spraying, have led, after a brief dip in acreage in 2006, to the proliferation of the bush in smaller plots dispersed throughout the country's diverse tropical landscapes and, by 2010, the bush's sudden rebirth back in Peru's Upper Huallaga (Romero 2010). UN monitors of the Colombian restriction program caused a political uproar when publicizing such eradication fiascos; for example, in 2007 alone, showing a 27 percent compensatory spike in

Colombian coca plantings. Plan Colombia, unequivocally sold on the promise of eliminating illicit cocaine in the Andes, is now hailed instead in Washington as a successful “security” program, the prequel to actual drug suppression, which is just starting to register in Colombia. It is also vaunted as the model for fighting drugs in Mexico.

MEXICAN OPPORTUNITIES SEIZED, 1985–2000

Since the mid-1990s, the hottest and most profitable site of cocaine’s journey to the United States has snaked a thousand kilometers north: to the U.S. borderlands of Mexico—right up against the consuming U.S. market and its state prohibitionist institutions. In 2008–10, Mexican president Felipe Calderón’s U.S.-backed offensive against trafficking groups sparked an explosion of official and trafficker violence, on a scale now bordering a regional civil war. The same Washington drug warriors whose past policies helped push cocaine explosively north are now pushing the panic button about a destabilized U.S. border.

Since the start of past century, borderland towns like Tijuana, Nogales, and Juárez produced rivulets of smuggling activity, from the first banned pharmaceuticals (including cocaine concoctions) and Prohibition alcohol before World War II to homegrown opiates and then marijuana from the 1940s to the 1970s. By the 1970s, in this murky pre-history of Mexican drug organizations, the city of Culiacán, Sinaloa, was the storied capital of Mexican drug trades, steeped in a vibrant regional outlaw and border smuggling culture (dating to Mexico’s territorial amputation in 1848), along with newer borderlands dope growing and spontaneous hippy smugglers. Even today, the majority of Mexico’s *narcotraficantes* emerge from the rustic northern underclasses, if often aligned and professionalized with the regional entrepreneurs and politicians nurtured under decades of PRI rule (Astorga 1995).

The early 1960s dispersion of drug mafias from Cuba brought the first noticeable wave of coke and new cocaine expertise to Mexico. By the mid-1970s (following Nixon’s dramatic 1970 Operation Intercept blockade of Mexican marijuana and poppy), the easily concealed Andean powder found regularized passage through Mexico, along with the diversity of drugs that always have and will cross Mexico by land and sea. Mexico’s two-thousand-mile land frontier with the United States does not simply present a daunting geographic terrain for U.S. drug controllers, but a social one as well, as the world’s most heavily transited and commercially active border, and indeed as a line drawn between the “first” and “third” worlds. Equally problematic for antidrug efforts is the intractable and often murky political landscape of the Mexican state.

In the mid-1980s, however, both the scale and the profitability of cocaine transshipments through Mexico shot through the roof, sparking

a seismic shift in the political geography of cocaine's hemispheric commodity chain. As Colombian and U.S. authorities stepped up their attacks on figures like Escobar, drug consignment into Pacific northwest Culiacán and Mazatlán quickly branched out from Cali's Herrera organization. According to State Department estimates, by 1989 a third of the cocaine for the U.S. market entered through Mexico; by 1992, that figure reached one-half; and by the late 1990s, fully 75 to 85 percent. Today the UN tracks about 90 percent of cocaine passing into the United States through Mexico, though under current pressures, that figure is both questionable and highly unstable. During the mid-1990s, the income generated by the drug-exporting business in Mexico, led by the cocaine surge, ranged from \$10 billion (according to U.S. officials) to \$30 billion (Mexican figures), either way exceeding Mexico's revenues from its largest legal commodity export, oil (\$7.4 billion).³ Under cocaine's stimulus, drugs went from a regional enclave to a critical force throughout the Mexican political economy (Andreas 2009, chap. 4).

This shift to Mexico was an unmistakable blowback effect of U.S. pressures bearing down on the Medellín cartel of the 1980s and interdiction successes against open Florida air and sea drug corridors. Power drifted to Cali and its diversified Pacific networks across the convoluted, war-torn terrain of Central America (including allies and havens among a multiplicity of actors, such as the CIA-puppet Nicaraguan Contras). Colombians forged a broad business partnership with Mexican traffickers, who specialized in placing the goods across the border, at first on a simple fee basis of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per kilo. But tough-minded Mexicans swiftly won bargaining power against the politically besieged Colombians, demanding instead 40 to 50 percent shares in kind.

Commercializing cocaine on their own multiplied Mexican drug profits five- to tenfold, as did the rapid cultivation of retailing networks among Mexican gangs in the western United States. By the early 1990s, trafficking groups gained considerable autonomy from Colombian suppliers, and the DEA gauged the revenue stream of the Sinaloan cartel well above Medellín's earlier peak. By 2000, Mexicans took further moves toward independence by purchasing directly from peasant *cocaleros* across faraway borders in the Huallaga Valley in Peru, outflanking the original Colombian connection, a factor in the recent revival of Peruvian coca, and launching their own distribution networks to dynamic South American coke markets like Brazil and Argentina.

Apart from backfiring U.S. drug policies and Mexican business acumen, other factors entered into cocaine's meteoric rise: Mexico's 1980s "lost decade" of economic meltdown, the political death throes (1988–2000) of the authoritarian PRI state, the social transformation of frontier towns like Juárez and Tijuana into sprawling, misery-laden metropolises, and the commercial boom along the U.S. borderlands

before and after the 1994 NAFTA treaty. In other drug lines, Mexicans diversified into methamphetamine processing pushed over the line from the United States, and in recent years, a revival of marijuana crops linked to the buoyant California market.

A lucrative accelerant, cocaine fired a dramatic geographic shift in Mexican drug organizations, which splintered into a series of regionally rooted cartels across the north. Partly the fallout from the 1985 “Camarena affair” (a U.S. undercover agent caught in the fatal political web of officials and traffickers), the now highly exposed Sinaloan smugglers purposely dispersed across Mexico’s territory. From Sinaloa and the pioneering smuggling machines of Pedro Avilés Pérez, Eduardo Fernández, and Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, the action moved north to bases such as Tijuana and Juárez, to Matamoros and Reynoso in the eastern *Golfo*, and to entry and transfer points throughout the Mexican republic.

As in Colombia, successive antidrug sweeps since the 1970s had tended to strengthen these organizations, as they weeded out the weaker and less efficient businesses and tended to favor protective vertical structures. The emblematic transition occurred in the mid-1980s, when Pablo Acosta (d. 1986) helped establish a Sinaloa-linked wholesale cocaine transshipment base in Ojinaga-Presidio, Chihuahua (close to El Paso river crossings), which began to tap cargo planes ferrying product out of Cali. By the 1990s, Amado Carrillo Fuentes managed this area to earn his moniker, “Lord of the Skies,” for his deft domination of air routes, and became Mexico’s richest and most notorious druglord. This enterprise merged into the so-called Juárez cartel, a group originally formed by local real estate mogul Rafael Muñoz Talavera with the help of federal police commander Rafael Aguilar.

By the mid-1990s, Juárez had bypassed Sinaloa as the world’s leading drug reexport business, at odds with Sinaloans led now by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. As with Cali in Colombia, Juárez interests deftly exploited the government’s post-1985 political drive against the Sinaloans (Grayson 2010, chap. 5). Sinaloan Félix Gallardo dispersed his men throughout northwestern Mexico until he was jailed by President Carlos Salinas in 1989, a move that, in turn, helped fortify the Juárez cartel. Yet Carrillo Fuentes, although himself descended from the Sinaloans, was able to forge informal ties throughout the Salinas regime (1988–94), a boom that produced the mid-1990s “golden age” of the Juárez cartel, until his mysterious death during identity-change surgery in 1997.

Other groupings included the long-rooted Matamoros or Gulf cartel, created by the organizational genius Juan N. Guerra and expanded by Juan García Abrego during the Salinas era. After García Abrego’s capture and the move by the new Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), to extradite him to the United States (a blunt political mes-

sage to his PRI predecessor), the fortunes of the Gulf cartel rose as the state targeted Juárez. In the late 1990s, the Gulf cartel solved its leadership vulnerability problem with the bold strategy of incorporating army and policing units directly into the business. The death of Carrillo Fuentes, the outcry around corrupt Mexican drug czar General José Gutiérrez Rebollo, and Zedillo's militarization of drug conflicts allowed the Gulf cartel to recruit "los Zetas," a paramilitary antidrug unit originally trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas. In a stunning case of blowback, the ruthless and now notorious Zetas tutored in the Gulf before branching on their own across Mexico after the 2003 capture of cartel innovator Osiel Cárdenas.

Additional organizations grew out of regional partners that expanded or split from their Sinaloan forefathers, such as the Guadalajara cartel of Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo or its rivals in Tijuana, the Arrellano-Félix brothers (no relation, media myth aside), who wrestled with Sinaloans over Arizona border-crossing rights. However, as with the so-called Colombian cartels, the folkloric and official concept and discourse about territorial, top-down families riven by byzantine blood feuds detracts from objectively understanding such groups as competitive, innovating, transnational capitalist firms, marked by joint ventures, overlaps, and takeovers among the major cores, or the tens of thousands on other rungs who belong to flexible, cell-like, outsourced subsidiaries. The cartel concept and narcopropaganda itself also mystify their shifting but strong ties to sectors of the Mexican state and business groups, including U.S. finance (Campbell 2009, 19–20; Gootenberg 2009).

By the 1990s, the billions in spectacular cocaine money and the trade's spiraling risks reinforced as well as undermined the Mexican state's traditional collusion with regional drug traders. Following the Mexican Revolution, smuggling rings won a fair degree of complicity from northern political bosses, local police, and military units, in exchange for an expected share of trade profits. As the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) rose as an authoritarian national political machine by the 1940s, these arrangements became formalized: the varied military commands and governors developed tacit understandings with trafficking groups, divvying up the take from illicit and semi-illicit activities and defining the boundaries of protection, secrecy, and public tolerance.

In retrospect, such agreements of the 1940s to 1970s, if sometimes unstable, served to manage border trades and illicit financial flows at acceptable levels and with a PRI-like minimum of violence and competition—a statist equilibrium to be sorely missed after the 1980s. However, starting in the late 1970s, the *Operación Cóndor* assault on pot and poppy zones in Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango, abetted by the United States, plus the scandalous kidnapping and killing of DEA agent

Enrique “Kike” Camarena in 1985, signaled breakdowns of this compact between the state and Sinaloan traffickers, as the case exposed the layers of official complicity that Camarena was himself uncovering. The United States readjusted its support of Mexico’s authoritarian regime—which was already in trouble after the iffy 1988 elections—to include commitments to drug suppression as well as commercial liberalization.

The neoliberal Salinas regime marked a double-edged turning point in the politics of drugs. On the one hand, Salinas, seeking to refurbish Mexico’s image in the United States amid NAFTA negotiations, embraced for the first time a major national role in U.S.-led drug wars. In 1992–93, with U.S. assistance, drug-policing institutions were revamped on the interagency model of the DEA, and Mexico’s attorney general’s office became a well-funded drug-combating force. This development complemented a U.S. shift from Florida to militarized operations on the Mexican border, officially designated by the 1990s a High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. The South-West Border Initiative of 1994 signaled an integrated U.S. strategy against Mexican druglords, analogous to the anti-Medellín targeting of the previous decade (Andreas 2009, 55–57).

On the other hand, any pretense of Mexican “drug control” or constraint was undermined by the active involvement of high-level Salinas appointees (and family members) in the burgeoning drug trades, as the PRI lost its traditional internal discipline and the state descended into a full-blown “kleptocracy”—the political moniker bestowed by Mexicanist Alan Knight (2001). Cocaine interdiction and its risk premium multiplied the opportunities for graft. The stakes simply shot up too high: according to one study, bribes deployed by cocaine traffickers leaped from \$1.5 million to \$3.2 million in 1983 to \$460 million in 1993—larger than the attorney general’s entire annual budget—and thousands of federal agents and police became partners in various levels and roles of drug peddling. Deputy Attorney General Mario Ruiz Massieu, Salinas’s top antidrug prosecutor in 1993–94, allegedly ran a kickback-financed “franchising system” in which key border and antidrug officials purchased profitmaking posts for as much as one million dollars. Cabinet ministers opened modernized, NAFTA-oriented infrastructure like roads, runways, and ports to cocaine shippers. Mexican traffickers had become a potent, if invisible, political resource and political force in Mexico.

The panorama of drug destabilization in Mexico went public during the weaker Zedillo *sexenio* after 1994, when, in a break from custom, the new president openly publicized the corruption of his predecessor, perhaps to free the regime from association with the multiple crises (financial and political) of Mexico’s messy 1994 political transition. Drug-tinged upper-level political assassinations rocked Mexico in 1993–94 (including that of now-Attorney General Ruiz Massieu’s high-

ranking PRI politician brother), along with the arrest and exposure of Salinas's flamboyant brother Raúl for drug-induced "illicit enrichment." Alarming incidents registered of open combat between army and police units engaged in drug control and trafficking.

The late 1990s also saw the popularization and spread of a broad northern "narcoculture," both high and low, which glorified trafficker riches and verve in Mexican culture and media, and an explosion of intercartel rivalries that seemed to reflect Mexico's political fragmentation. The apogee of this exposure of the state was the highly embarrassing 1997 discovery (as U.S. penetration, intelligence, training, and funding deepened in the Mexican drug war) that the military chief of Mexico's "DEA," General Gutiérrez Rebollo, was working with the Juárez cartel, an incident sampled in the Hollywood drama *Traffic* (2000), a film all about the paradoxes of the now full-blown Mexico-U.S. "drug war zone."⁴ The long U.S. war against cocaine, begun far back in the 1940s, had come home to roost.

WHAT NOW?

Since Mexico's 2000 election, which ousted the long PRI political monopoly, continuing and complex realignments and reorganizations of Mexican drug organizations have taken place (see, e.g., Ravelo 2006; Rodríguez Castañeda 2009; Grillo 2011). Some respond to the democratizing shift to rule by the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), a party with historical oppositional roots in the north. President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) entered office with far more autonomy from traffickers than the outgoing PRI, though Fox's image was soon tainted by cartel politics in the 2001 "El Chapo" Guzmán case, in which the legendary Sinaloan capo mysteriously escaped a high-security prison.

Current PAN President Felipe Calderón took office in 2006, a few thousand disputed votes ahead of a charismatic leftist candidate, and, like George W. Bush in 2000, was a leader angling for a legitimating mission, which he soon pinned on an all-out Mexican drug war. Calderón rapidly found outside support in the October 2007 Mérida Initiative, a regional security pact modeled on Plan Colombia, Bush's parting gift to the surprisingly compliant Barack Obama. Since 2007, this program has funneled more than \$1.5 billion in antidrug funding to Mexico, making it now one of the most strategic of U.S. foreign aid programs. But like Odría in 1948 Peru, Pinochet in 1973 Chile, and Virgilio Barco in Colombia (1986–90), Calderón's 2007–11 Mexicanized war on drugs may further U.S. objectives in the short run but is bound to unleash larger and longer problems ahead.

Critics (e.g., Aguilar and Castañeda 2009) have accused Calderón of exaggerating for political gain the crime threat posed by traffickers—that

Mexican homicide rates and drug use were ebbing from 2001 to 2006—but in reality, “drug-related killings” had steadily advanced during the first PAN regime, doubling to a total of seven thousand deaths, mostly in the north. Calderón has fully militarized this conflict, sending thousands of troops and federal police into trafficking centers in what is now a virtual military occupation of cities like Ciudad Juárez. The result has been the much-publicized spiral of violence, rights violations, and sheer terror of the past three years in northern Mexico, as assassinations by all sides have reached almost fifty thousand.

Drug violence had been ratcheting up since cocaine came on strong in the 1980s, yet the bloodletting under Calderón’s watch is surely Mexico’s worst social violence since the catastrophic Cristero religious war of the 1920s. It has provoked an open battle for supremacy between and within the Mexican government and countering and splintering trafficker groups. In Ciudad Juárez alone, a city of 1.4 million adjoining El Paso, executions, many quite gruesome, rose from 300 in 2007 to 1,620 in 2008, 2,660 in 2009, and 3,111 in 2010 (and perhaps 5,000 in 2011 [*Los Angeles Times* 2011]), as vying factions from Sinaloa, the Gulf, and Tijuana battled over the fresh opportunities opened by the crackdown (Transborder Institute 2010).

DEA officials, eager for signs of “victory” in their endless quest against Andean cocaine, see Mexico as a replay of Colombia’s “success” in breaking up its “cartels” in the late 1980s (Esquivil 2009). They are oblivious to the ways that those pressures largely worked to enhance the strategies and skills of Colombian exporters and fostered, over the next two decades, the bloody dynamic now playing out along the U.S.-Mexican border. Other regional states, especially weak ones like Guatemala and Honduras, are now well poised (given Mexican trafficker penetration) to absorb any cocaine trades that Mexico repels. Signs thus point to another potential snaking of the cocaine commodity chain like that of the Cali-Florida link of the 1990s. So far, “spillover” violence from Mexico remains minimal (despite panic about the border, crime is falling on the U.S. side), meaning that Mexicans, like the Colombians before them, are doing the dying for us.

If there is any good news in cocaine’s drive north and the flaring drug violence every step along the way, it is that the conflict is also unfolding on a rapidly changing international scene. The larger U.S. interdiction strategy against hemispheric drugs has taken some hits itself lately, and the newest blowback is expressed in open dissent from Latin America. In 2008, a broad coalition of Latin American political leaders (including former presidents of Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil) issued a scathing and widely received critique of the past 30-year U.S. “war on drugs,” calling for a major “paradigm shift” toward public health, harm reduction, and a civil society buffer to drug violence (Latin American

Commission on Drugs and Democracy 2008). Some UN agencies, with doubts from Colombia, for the first time are wondering about the U.S. obsession with supply control and eradication, and European criticism of both Plan Colombia and Plan Mérida is loud.

Hemispheric change is brewing, from President Morales's nationalist pro-coca politics in Bolivia (where the DEA has withdrawn from action) to Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa's outspoken opposition to punitive drug laws; to local experimental legalization of drug possession in places such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico; and to the near-miss of Proposition 19 in Mexico's former northern province of California. Ex-president Fox of Mexico dramatically calls now for unilateral national drug decriminalization as a weapon against the cartels (contrary to his own party's policies), and even Calderón is unusually candid in blaming the U.S. thirst for drugs for Mexico's predicament. Calderón has not backed down in Juárez, despite widespread civic protests in the north and polls that show now a scant 10 percent local approval of his initially popular but now hemorrhaging drug war stalemate. Moreover, prospects are rising in Mexico that a reborn, order-oriented PRI will sweep back into power in 2012 and seek a tacit *rapprochement* with drug organizations—a nightmare blowback scenario, in the eyes of U.S. intelligence.

It is time for the U.S. public, and our own political class, to heed this regional change and the tragic history of cocaine's long march north. It is time, as drug specialists have long pleaded (Reuter 2009), to finally phase out the disastrous hemispheric war on drugs and to target our energies and funding on public health and social programs that reduce drug demand and harm—starting here at home.

NOTES

This essay mainly draws from my book *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (2008). I thank Froylán Enciso for helping decipher patterns of later Mexican drug groups.

1. Obviously, I differ with Massing's assertion (1998) that Nixon's drug policies were "working": rather, they worked, over the longer term, to produce the U.S. cocaine boom of the 1980s.

2. Such statistics can be confusing and misleading to readers and specialists alike. For example, the Andean "capacity" for illicit cocaine is about 1,400 tons, though a higher ratio is now intercepted (42 percent claimed in 2006), but quite unevenly across Andean countries. Cocaine-coca source distribution is rapidly changing (Romero 2010), so I do not cite the unstable and methodologically contested figures of the latest UNDCP report (2011). Among the claims: given falls in Colombian coca, Peruvian illicit acreage (now up 45 percent since its 1998 nadir) and cocaine export may surpass Colombia by 2011–12.

3. Andreas himself dubs this "Pushing Cocaine Smuggling to the U.S.-Mexico Border" (2009, 51).

4. The byzantine course of drug organization splits, alliances, and infighting under the PAN and Calderón's post-2007 drug war cannot be covered in this essay. A strong recent source is Grillo 2011, esp. chaps. 6–7.

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