

Once Upon a Time in Mexico : [1]

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In 60 years, Mexico's children will not be hearing stories of mere hardship from their grandparents. Instead, they will hear gruesome tales of mass murders, decapitations, and kidnappings. They will have described to them the sounds of gunshots outside of classroom windows, explosions in city streets, and the sorrow following the deaths of loved ones. This is assuming, of course, that the drug wars of today are not present in 60 years.

Blood on the Tracks

On October 19, 12 adult bodies were discovered outside of an elementary school in Tijuana. The children of the school, already numb to the constant presence of violence in the area, discussed the carnage excitedly. Across Mexico, and especially in towns that border the U.S., the news is the same. In fact, according to the New York Times, there have been over 3,700 drug-related homicides in Mexico this year, a jump from 2,700 in 2007. The killings are a result of Mexico's rampant drug war and include the deaths of dozens of innocent bystanders, from pregnant women to young children. While the numbers are startling enough, the details of the killings are far more disturbing. Limbless torsos, vats of acid filled with human remains and decapitated bodies seem to turn up with frightening consistency, often in highly populated areas or near schools.

President Felipe Calderón has made the war on drugs in Mexico a primary focus of his presidency. Elected in 2006, his campaign has resulted in the capture or killing of numerous cartel leaders and the arrests of many corrupt officials within the Mexican government. He has arrested over 10,000 people on drug related charges and has sent a total of 24,000 soldiers to pivotal areas around Mexico.

Despite his valiant efforts, there has been major backlash, including the current wave of violent crime. According to the 2007 Annual Report by the

Congressional Research Service, the arrests of top cartel leaders have forced a shifting of alliances between the cartels. The once separate Tijuana and Gulf cartels have aligned and are in a turf war against what is known as “The Federation,” an alliance of several of Mexico’s other cartels, including the powerful Sinaloa and Juarez cartels.

The power held by the cartels is astounding. Supplied with nearly limitless capital, they outgun the Mexican army and have bought their way into the highest government offices. They have the resources to employ and bribe hundreds of people, offering more money than the majority of legitimate jobs available in Mexico. They even employ their own armies for protection. Los Zetas, the Gulf cartel’s paramilitary army, were originally members of Mexico’s Special Air Mobile Force Group. They are trained to use highly sophisticated equipment from sniper rifles to helicopters. With their knowledge of military tactics and their expansive arsenal, they pose an enormous threat to both Mexico and the U.S.

“Everybody Must Get Stoned”

Not surprisingly, the United States is the number one importer of the drugs that fund the violence within Mexico. The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report for 2008 lists Mexico as a major supplier of marijuana, methamphetamine, and heroin to the U.S. Also according to the report, “90 percent of all cocaine consumed in the United States transits Mexico.”

Marijuana is the leading drug being used across the country, with the highest concentration of smokers being of college age. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) states that the majority of marijuana being sold within Minnesota is from Mexico, an example of the cartels’ stunning range of influence. The report indicates that most retail marijuana is supplied by Mexican drug traffickers but also states that there is an increasing demand for “Domestic High Grade” marijuana of higher quality, which would likely be grown by individuals within the United States.

What can we do about the carnage in Mexico? The United States is currently pumping exorbitant amounts of money into the “War on Drugs.” According to the National Drug Control Strategy Budget Summary for 2009, the U.S. government spent \$13.7 billion in 2008, and is proposing an additional \$14.1 billion for 2009. The budget states “The Strategy...is based on three pillars: (1)

Stopping Use Before It Starts, (2) Healing America's Drug Users, and (3) Disrupting the Market for Illicit Drugs." Also proposed for 2009 is the Merida Initiative, a program requesting \$465 million in additional funds for Mexico and Central America.

Who is to blame?

Who is truly to blame for the violence in Mexico? Is it the drug addicts and junkies or the dealers that supply them? Is it the farmers growing the coca or is it the cartels that distribute the cocaine? These are all the targets of the war on drugs. Like the war on terror, our government has defined a guilty party in which the good people of the West can unite against. And like any war in which the enemy is a loosely defined as evil (communism, terrorism, etc) the fear generated by the mysterious enemy often distracts people from our government's own shortcomings.

The American lifestyle and our government's policies can be directly criticized for the drug-inspired violence in Mexico. Our government is built on a capitalist, free market economy and yet we somehow fail to recognize what our policies do to the drug market. What could be more capitalist than a drug cartel? The laws of supply and demand are in full effect. As many Wake readers know, the current demand for marijuana is about as high as its users.

Prohibition creates a black market in which demand can only be met by supply from illegitimate sources. Cartels are businesses that are, in true capitalist form, exploiting a niche – one created by our own government's anti-drug laws. Unlike legitimate businesses, however, they are forced to embrace illegal and often violent methods to survive. The same is true for the farmers who harvest the drugs being sold. The illegality of farming these substances forces many of the farmers to move to more secluded areas, having disastrous effects on natural habitats and ecosystems. The farmers do this not by choice, but out of poverty and desperation, creating a class of victims who also contribute to the problem.

Despite the U.S. and Mexican governments' efforts, the billions and billions of dollars spent and the countless lives lost, illegal drugs are still readily available. Many people on this campus are only a few phone calls away from scoring anything from marijuana to cocaine. Across the country, the picture is much the same.

The solution, though, is not prohibition. For proof, look no further than the 1920s. Like today, the government deemed a substance damaging to society and made it illegal. The response was organized crime. The illegality of alcohol created a black market, raised prices, and put money in the pockets of crime bosses. This inevitably led to violence as criminals fought for power while police attempted to stop them. The war on drugs today is similar, except instead of one substance in one country, it is dozens of substances all over the world.

So why not legalize? If we are worried about the possible overuse of these drugs due to legalization, we should examine why American citizens are so prone to embrace escapism. We are one of the few countries in the world whose citizens have both the money and the time to experiment with drugs. Our government seems to impose the harshest restrictions on drugs, and yet we do more drugs than any other country on the planet. Capitalism is inherently based around personal greed; perhaps this is what inspires our excess. Or perhaps it is the competition that capitalism and American society inspire, leaving people overworked and exhausted. The increase in divorce rates may reflect this, as people have little time for personal life outside of work. Understanding drugs and why people use them is the first step in creating successful regulatory policy.

Solutions

Legalization and regulation of currently illegal substances would immediately diminish the capital and power of the entire drug industry. From street dealers to cartels, the entire drug empire would slowly collapse. The billions being spent on the war on drugs could be invested in education or the plethora of other areas of society in which there is a deficit of funding. A much larger focus could be put on drug treatment, helping addicts get off the street and get into jobs.

The benefits would extend abroad as well. Instead of Colombian coca farmers, Mexican marijuana farmers or Afghan poppy farmers supplying a bloodthirsty industry to survive, the U.S. could legitimately import crops and put money into their collapsing economies. These crops, in turn, could be sold in a highly regulated environment and taxed, increasing capital and jobs within the U.S. The money generated in countries abroad would decrease desperation within their population, which would in turn decrease violent crime.

The complexity of the struggle in Mexico means every solution will have its

downfalls. There would most likely be an initial backlash of violence among the cartels. However, with funding being cut off due to a government-controlled market, they would slowly weaken. The violence inspired would be minimal compared to what would be created by fighting the cartels with brute force. In America, there would likely be an initial spike in drug use. However, with funding going into education and rehabilitation, this would probably return to rates of use comparable to the present. With drugs legalized, much of their glamorization in media would be lost, which may make the use of drugs appeal less to the younger population. Our overcrowded prisons could be relieved of their nonviolent prisoners, allowing taxes to flow into other more worthwhile causes. The \$465 million of the proposed Merida Initiative could be used to help spur Mexico's economy and relieve economic desperation within the country. This would also benefit border control, as it would lessen the surge of illegal immigrants into the United States.

This is not a perfect solution, but the government's attempt at repressing drug use is obviously flawed. The billions of dollars invested in the war on drugs have created a profitable industry in which criminals thrive. For the sake of countries like Mexico, who are torn apart by the drug war, our perspective needs to change as soon as possible. This can no longer remain a quiet revolution – it must be embraced if we wish to stop the bloodshed as quickly as possible.

Until a major paradigm shift occurs in first world countries around the world, it is up to the individual to start making better choices. Many people already buy local and organically produced groceries, why not do the same with weed? Keep in mind, the harder the drug, the more covered in blood. They don't call it the "green" movement for nothing.

1. <http://www.wakemag.org/voices/once-upon-a-time-in-mexico/>
2. <http://www.wakemag.org/author/joetting/>

