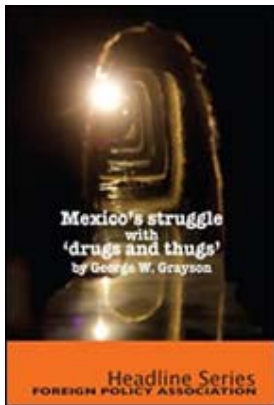


Book Review — Mexico's Struggle with 'Drugs and Thugs'



A review of:

George W. Grayson, [Mexico's Struggle with 'Drugs and Thugs'](#)

New York: Foreign Policy Association, *Headline Series*, No. 331, Winter 2009.
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Mexico is in the thralls of bloody drug wars. Last year these battles for profit and power cost an estimated 6,290 lives. So far this year, over 1,000 people have died as the cartels and their criminal soldiers seek dominance in the lucrative global narco-markets. These narco-conflicts are waged by cartels, gangs, paramilitary militias. The cartels fight at three levels: within their own enterprise for dominance; against other cartel alliances for market control; and against the security forces of the state (police and military) to fend off interference. Collectively this amounts to a virtual civil war fought by [criminal netwarriors](#). [1] In the words of David Ronfeldt:

[T]he serious risk for Mexico is not an old-fashioned civil war or another revolution — that seems unlikely. The greater risk is a plethora of social, guerrilla, and criminal netwars. Mexico's security in the information age may be increasingly a function of netwars of all varieties... [2]

These netwars challenge Mexico and the cross-border region that embraces the frontier between Mexico and the United States with a series of interlocking, networked criminal insurgencies. Communities cower with fear against cartel reprisals and public debate is hampered by a lack of detailed understanding of the conflict and its players. [3] This monograph, "Mexico's Struggle with 'drugs and thugs'," helps fill the knowledge void.

George W. Grayson is the Class of 1938 Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary, is a respected area specialist on Mexico. In addition to his long-standing academic focus, he is a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and an associate scholar at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Grayson brings over a quarter century of experience to bear in this lean, yet rich account of the social and political dynamics underlying the current cartel conflict.

After the requisite reference to the ubiquitous violence and atrocities in Mexico's drug wars — decapitations, torture, castrations, and kidnappings — Grayson uses the Morelia massacre as the

starting point for his expose. The Morelia grenade attacks on 15 September 2008 marred Mexican Independence day celebrations, killing 8 and injuring over 110 men, women, and children. These attacks captured the attention of the American public and policymakers to the reality of Mexico's intense, ugly, and bloody narco-wars; for many, this was the first time the potential "Colombianization of Mexico" became a real possibility.

After a brief introduction, Grayson divides his policy essay into three sections. The first — *Wars and the Spread of Drugs* — considers historical perspectives to place the current situation in context. He looks at US drug wars of the past and their long-standing impact on Mexico. The cumulative effect of this cross-border black market was the entrenchment of corruption where generous bribes — *mordidas* — to politicians allowed desperados and drug gangs to gain control of lucrative "plazas" — corridors and areas for transacting drugs-related business.

The second section — *The Weakening of the Mexican State* — looks at the changing dynamics of Mexican politics after the decline of the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) and the ascent of the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*) in Mexico's political dynamic. The relationship between the government and criminal enterprises is examined in the third section — *Calderón's Top Priority* — where Grayson looks at the transition into the current situation.

Felipe Calderón, a moderate affiliated with PAN, started his six-year term with the desire to create jobs, reduce poverty, and contain crime. His presidency coincided with a dramatic increase in drug crime. As a result, Calderón emphasized police reform and increased his reliance on the military as a tool for internal security and order. Here we see a brief recounting of the evolution of drugs violence, the increasing hold of the cartels (including discussion of cartel dynamics), the impact of corruption on police forces, and the increase in cartel feelings of impunity. Options for transforming narcotics policy (including responses like Platform Mexico and the Mérida Initiative) are also discussed.

As Grayson closes his situational review he essentially asks two questions: 1) *are the cartels in retreat?* or 2) *is Mexico moving toward dual sovereignty shared between the elected government and the drug barons?* If the latter is the case, we could see the rise of a "parallel state" [4] where political leaders and the public interact with, and power is shared with, entrenched criminal groups.

While Grayson gives no clear answer, as this is still an open question, he describes (p. 61) the current cartel situation — a major factor in this balance:

For their part, the criminal syndicates are reconfiguring their organizations, upgrading recruitment campaigns, developing their own militias, levying taxes on businesses in their domains, buying expensive properties, acquiring athletic teams, organizing underground financial institutions, selling protection to municipal governments, providing jobs in distressed regions, forging relations with their counterparts in other countries, contributing to religious projects, exacting "tolls" to cross plazas they control, and paying musicians to compose ballads that extol the virtues of their leaders.

When *narcocorridos* (ballads) extoll the accelerating conflict, drug dons act like warlords bolstered by a growing social base, and the weapons and tactics used by Mexico's nearly 100,000 criminal soldiers steadily increase in sophistication and lethality, a significant challenge is

presented not only to Mexico, but also the US, Canada, Latin America and other points on the globe as the cartels extend their reach and forge new alliances.

After setting the stage for understanding these dynamics, Grayson closes his monograph with a series of discussion questions for students and discussion groups. These are ideal policy questions. They include looking at the proper role for the US, the reform of the police and judiciary, and the factors and conditions that foster the rise of groups like *Los Zetas* and “narcojuniors” (violent youth).

The text is also supplemented by an annotated reading list, and three detailed appendices. The first is an in-depth description of Mexican cartels (Sinaloa, Sonora, Milenio, Jalisco, Colima, Gulf, Juárez, and Tijuana—or Arellano Félix Organization). The interactions with related groups including *La Familia*, *Los Zetas*, and “narcojuniors” are discussed in the second. Finally, there is a chronology of major counter-drug operations and a detailed description of Mexico’s security cabinet.

Grayson’s contribution to understanding Mexico’s drug wars is significant. As the criminal and humanitarian consequences of Mexico’s drug violence turn neighborhoods and towns into “failed communities” and “no-go areas” and the brutal battles resonate across the border, Grayson deftly describes the intrinsic political dimensions of this conflict. He goes beyond current reporting to place the conflict in context. His review provides a valuable foundation for current policy discussions. It is essential reading for police, intelligence analysts, and policymakers seeking to understand Mexico’s drug wars and craft viable responses for its cross-border impacts.

References:

[1] John P. Sullivan, “[Criminal Netwarriors in Mexico’s Drug Wars](http://www.groupintel.com/2008/12/22/criminal-netwarriors-in-mexico%e2%80%99s-drug-wars/),” *GroupIntel*, 22 December 2008 at <http://www.groupintel.com/2008/12/22/criminal-netwarriors-in-mexico%e2%80%99s-drug-wars/>.

[2] David Ronfeldt, “[Mexico plagued by myriad interlaced netwars — a TIMN analysis](http://twotheories.blogspot.com/2009/02/mexicos-potential-plagued-by-myriad.html),” *Apropos Two Theories*, 27 February 2009 at <http://twotheories.blogspot.com/2009/02/mexicos-potential-plagued-by-myriad.html>.

[3] See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “[Frontlines of Criminal Insurgency: Understanding the Plazas](http://www.groupintel.com/2009/03/03/frontlines-of-criminal-insurgency-understanding-the-plazas/),” *GroupIntel*, 03 March 2009 at <http://www.groupintel.com/2009/03/03/frontlines-of-criminal-insurgency-understanding-the-plazas/>.

[4] See Ivan Briscoe, “[The proliferation of the "parallel state,"](http://www.fride.org/publication/511/the-proliferation-of-the-parallel-state) Madrid: FRIDE, 2008 at <http://www.fride.org/publication/511/the-proliferation-of-the-parallel-state>.

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For additional reading:

[State of Siege Mexico's Criminal Insurgency](#), John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, Small Wars Journal, 19 August 2008.

[La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate](#), George W. Grayson, Foreign Policy Research Institute, *E-Notes*, February 2009.

[Los Zetas: the Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel](#), George W. Grayson, Foreign Policy Research Institute, *E-Notes*, May 2008.

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