

America's Role in Mexico's Drug War

Is the U.S. to blame? That was the question at the latest Intelligence Squared US debate.

By Jerry Adler | Published December 8, 2009

Forty years ago, the United States government began a "war on drugs" whose cost so far is estimated at \$1 trillion, and rising. In 2006, newly elected Mexican President Felipe Calderón began a crackdown on the drug-smuggling cartels—a "war on drugs" that really is a war, involving military troops and weapons and more than 10,000 dead so far. Americans buy drugs from the cartels and sell them guns, and Washington arguably provided the example for the Mexican government's hard-line tactics. So is America to blame for Mexico's drug war? That was the topic at last week's Intelligence Squared US debate at New York University.



Arguing for the motion were journalist Andrés Martínez of the New America Foundation; Harvard economist Jeffrey A. Miron; and Fareed Zakaria, editor of NEWSWEEK International.

Opposed to the motion were Jorge Castañeda, a professor at NYU and foreign minister of Mexico from 2000 to 2003; Chris W. Cox, the chief lobbyist for the National Rifle Association; and Asa Hutchinson, former administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Edited excerpts of the debate: Edited excerpts from the debate:

Zakaria: If you look at any metric—the availability of drugs, the potency, the price—they suggest the drug war declared by Richard Nixon has failed, has done nothing to dampen demand, and has increased criminality. The effect outside the United States has been to internationalize the problem. We began by interdicting drugs in Miami, then moved offshore and to Central America. We had the heroic war of liberation in Panama, where [President] Manuel Noriega was indicted in a U.S. court for drug dealing. Then the supply shifted to Colombia, where the United States has now spent something like \$10 billion, and the GAO recently reported it has had virtually no effect. So Mexico is only the last in a long line of these drug wars, and you have to ask: are we not in some way responsible? We are the largest consumer of drugs in the world. We have the largest supply of weaponry in the world. Two thousand guns cross the American border every day into Mexico. If the supply of weapons is coming from one place, and the demand for drugs is coming from one place, it seems self-evident that we are responsible.

Hutchinson: The culture of corruption that has developed in Mexico, the failure of the rule of law in Mexico, is one of the largest contributing factors to the violence we see today. Mexico has allowed itself to be a major transit and source country. They resisted U.S. help. In 1985 Kiki Camarena, a wonderful DEA agent, was tortured and murdered in Guadalajara, and there was a massive manhunt for the perpetrators, and Mexico [took the position] that we were infringing on their sovereignty. They have resisted any U.S. assistance ever since. The cartels have operated with impunity, and that is not the fault of the United States.

Miron: Is America to blame for Mexico's wars? Indisputably yes. No one disputes that the U.S. consumes drugs produced or shipped through Mexico, but that's not the whole issue. The reason there are drug wars is because the drug trade is prohibited. Whether you think drugs should be legal or not, it's a fact that when you drive a market underground, it becomes violent. Why? Because participants cannot resolve their disputes with lawyers, or by complaining to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, but only by shooting each other. Prohibition creates the violence, and the U.S., far and away above any other country, has foisted drug prohibition on the rest of the world. Let me read you a quote: "While every Mexican administration since the '60s has piously declared that it intended to intensify its drug enforcement efforts for domestic motivations, the real reason has always been American pressure." Who wrote that? One of my opponents, Jorge Castañeda, in an article I found on the Web a few days ago.

Martinez: I understand some of Professor Castañeda's students are here, and I want to remind you, your vote is secret and your grades will not be affected by voting on the right side here. We Americans need to make a choice. Either we get serious about clamping down on the consumption of illegal drugs, or we should legalize them. We can't have it both ways. Let's not be distracted by talk of corruption in Mexico or about America's gun laws. This is about what happens to a nation that shares a 2,000-mile border with the richest nation on Earth, that consumes some \$65 billion worth of drugs a year and cedes control of that market to offshore criminal organizations. Geography sometimes is destiny: there's an old saying, "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States." I recently read a best-selling book on Mexico, and the author wrote that the U.S. wants Mexico "to wage the war and provide the corpses, so it doesn't have to." And the author of this book is Jorge Castañeda. There's still time, Jorge, to switch sides.

Castañeda: First, for my students: in Mexico, we have ways of knowing how you vote. My point is very simple here. The United States is not to blame for Mexico's drug war, Mexico is not to blame for Mexico's drug war. President Felipe Calderón is to blame for Mexico's drug war, a war of choice that he should not have declared, that cannot be won, and is doing enormous damage to Mexico. Why did President Calderón declare this war? Because he felt he needed to legitimize himself in the view of the Mexican people, because his election was questioned. I tried to run against Calderón, and I wasn't allowed to, and [then] I supported him actively during the campaign. I thought he won, but he decided that he had to legitimize himself, by calling the Army out into the streets. This war cannot be won, because it is failing to comply with the tenets of a good friend of mine, Colin Powell. To go into a war like this, you need to have overwhelming force, and we don't have it. You need a definition of victory, we don't have it. And you should have the support of the Mexican people, which President Calderón does have, but he's running out of it very quickly.

As in all IQ Squared US debates, the audience voted at the start and again at the end, and the winner was the side that swayed the most votes in its direction. On the first vote, 43 percent agreed that America was to blame for Mexico's drug war, 22 percent disagreed and 35 percent were undecided. At the end, the margin was 72 percent in favor, 22 percent against and 6 percent undecided—a victory for the side in favor, by an unusually wide margin.