

Commentary

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The Obama Administration's New Strategy to Curb Drug-Related Violence

Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton deserves applause for her forceful leadership regarding drug-related violence in Mexico. By linking US efforts closely with those of the Mexican government and by unambiguously acknowledging that drug users in the US create an immense demand for illegal drugs, Clinton has opened a new era for US drug policy. While en-route to Mexico, Clinton said that "Our insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade."ⁱ Secretary Clinton also said that stepped-up law enforcement will be matched by new efforts to reduce the use of illegal drugs in the US.

Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, recently stated that the department is offering support to Mexico in hopes to reduce and prevent spillover violence from its border, reduce the number of conflicts between the drug cartels in the US, and eliminate distribution rings across the country. Napolitano was outright in acknowledging that there is a substantial drug problem in the US. She went on to say, "We seem to deal with it in peaks and valleys as opposed to a sustained effort. We need to recognize that any effort, particularly aimed at those under the age of 18 to keep them from experimenting with drugs, has a payoff in multiples over the lifetime of an individual...and our health policy ought to recognize this as well as our law enforcement policy." This message of prevention and connecting drug use prevention programs to reduce demand for drugs is an essential piece of the solution to these problems."ⁱⁱ

Napolitano also said, "What's going on in Mexico is unprecedented because you have the federal government of Mexico now taking on these huge drug cartels and these cartels are responsible for bringing tonnage quantities of cocaine, marijuana into our country, distributing them in every state." She goes on to say that Homeland Security wants to "prevent any spillover violence coming from Mexico where they've had 6,000 homicides including 550 assassination of law enforcement officers and political officials in Mexico in connection with this drug battle...Within cities in the United States you have cartel members battling other cartel members and this takes the form of kidnappings for example in cities like Phoenix. And then you have these distribution rings of drugs that go everywhere from Brownsville, Texas all the way to Sheboygan, Wisconsin...These cartels touch the United States in a very direct way."ⁱⁱⁱ

US Attorney General Eric Holder also recently stated that, "These cartels will be destroyed...They are lucrative, they are violent, and they are operated with stunning planning and precision."^{iv} The Obama administration appears to be unified on this important topic. Referring to drug trafficking and its related violence, President Obama said "This is not an existential threat but a serious threat"^v

Three former presidents, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, Cesar Gaviria of Columbia, and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, acting under the aegis of the Latin American Commission on Drugs

and Democracy, recently blamed American drug policies for the devastating problems in their region caused by illegal drug trafficking. These three former presidents offered a single solution, breaking what they called a policy “taboo,” by proposing that the United States decriminalize marijuana.^{vi}

Subsequently Mexican President Felipe Calderon was more constructive in his approach to drug-related violence as the first head of state to meet with President Obama. He pleaded for the United States to reduce its illegal drug use to curb the drug traffic that is ravaging his country.^{vii}

President Calderon and Obama cabinet members, Clinton, Napolitano and Holder are right in focusing on US domestic drug use as the driving force behind the extensive drug trafficking and related violence that is spilling over from Mexico to the United States. President Calderon and Secretary Clinton will be meeting soon to combat drug trafficking.

When asked about sharing responsibility for drug trafficking between countries in an interview, Clinton said that it would be “...inaccurate to absolve ourselves of responsibility or to absolve the Mexicans of responsibility. This is a shared responsibility. We share the border... the demand for illegal drugs is what keeps these guys in business. And it's a, you know, multi-billion-dollar, \$25-plus billion industry.”^{viii}

Bipartisan efforts to contain illegal drug use in the US have shown success that few public health efforts can match. Illegal drug use peaked in the US in 1979, with 14% of Americans aged 12 and older reported as current users. This figure fell to 8% in 2007, a decline of 42.8% in three decades. However US demand for drugs remains high enough to keep traffickers in businesses year after year. There is much to do in order to continue and improve demand reduction efforts including gathering support for such an approach.

Clinton was recently asked, “...how do you tell the people -- for instance, your home state of Illinois, or mine, Wisconsin -- that [the drug war] really matters, that this is important? Why should it matter to them?”^{ix}

Clinton responded, “Well, for three reasons. I mean, first of all, these drug gangs have penetrated to America...These are vicious criminals who know that they can make billions of dollars on getting American young people, primarily, addicted to illegal drugs. And so Wisconsin, Illinois, no place is immune from their ruthless effort to try to dominate the drug trade.

“Secondly, you know, if we have an unstable, insecure border between the United States and Mexico, we have a lot of resources that will be necessarily shifted down because, you're right, it's 60 million people who live in states along these borders. And we're starting to see kidnappings go up in Phoenix. We're starting to see, you know, murders across the border in towns in Texas...

“And finally, the more unstable and insecure Mexico is, the more people will leave. And they'll come to every place in America. And what we want to do is try to help the Mexicans defeat these drug cartels, help them stabilize their security, so that they can work with us on, you know,

increasing development and economic growth right in Mexico so people will actually be able to, you know, avoid migrating. They'll be able to stay right in Mexico and develop themselves.”

Clinton expressed hope for the future of Mexico’s law enforcement, saying “I think that under President Calderon, they have begun to reform their police systems, their judicial systems. They've put the military in the lead on this fight. So they're doing what we as Americans have learned in both police work and counterinsurgency work is what you've got to do in order to be effective.”^x

Without the high demand for illegal drugs in the US, Mexican drug cartels and traffickers would not be thriving. The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) supports President Calderon and Secretaries Clinton and Napolitano in their honest assessment that the US needs to reduce the use of illegal drugs at home to make a significant impact in decreasing international drug trafficking. This approach contrasts strongly with the three former Latin American presidents’ proposal to make illegal drugs cheaper, safer and more socially acceptable. Such a strategy would continue to build the market for illegal drugs. Decriminalizing marijuana will not reduce the use of marijuana. It is not a winning strategy for anyone except drug traffickers.

For more information and to learn about powerful new ideas that can significantly reduce the use of illegal drugs, visit www.ibhinc.org.

ⁱ U.S. shares blame for Mexico drug violence, Clinton says. (2009, March 26). *CNN*. Retrieved April 1, 2009, from <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/25/clinton.mexico/index.html?iref=newssearch#cn-STCText>

ⁱⁱ Napolitano, J. (Speaker). (2009, March 30). Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano/Senator Jim Webb [Radio broadcast episode]. *The Diane Rehm Show*. Washington, D.C.: WAMU 88.5 American University Radio.

ⁱⁱⁱ Napolitano, J. (Speaker). (2009, March 30). Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano/Senator Jim Webb [Radio broadcast episode]. *The Diane Rehm Show*. Washington, D.C.: WAMU 88.5 American University Radio.

^{iv} Mexico drug cartels exporting bloody mayhem to U.S. (2009, February 26). *Newsmax.com*. Retrieved February 26, 2009, from http://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/drug_cartel_violence/2009/02/26/185791.html

^v Rehm, D. (Speaker). (2009, March 30). Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano/Senator Jim Webb [Radio broadcast episode]. *The Diane Rehm Show*. Washington, D.C.: WAMU 88.5 American University Radio.

^{vi} Cardoso, F.H., Gaviria, C., & Zedillo, E. (2009, February 23). The War on Drugs is a Failure [Opinion], *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved February 23, 2009 from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123535114271444981.html>

^{vii} De Cordoba, J. (2009, February 12). Latin American panel calls US drug war a failure, *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved February 14, 2009 from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123439889394275215.html>

^{viii} Van Susteren, G. (Interviewer). Clinton, H.R. (Interviewee). (2009, March 27). Sec. Clinton on Mexico drug violence. [Television broadcast]. *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. New York: Fox News Network, LLC. Retrieved from

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^{ix} Van Susteren, G. (Interviewer). Clinton, H.R. (Interviewee). (2009, March 27). Sec. Clinton on Mexico drug violence. [Television broadcast]. *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. New York: Fox News Network, LLC. Retrieved from

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^x Van Susteren, G. (Interviewer). Clinton, H.R. (Interviewee). (2009, March 27). Sec. Clinton on Mexico drug violence. [Television broadcast]. *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. New York: Fox News Network, LLC. Retrieved from

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