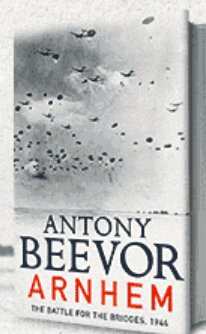
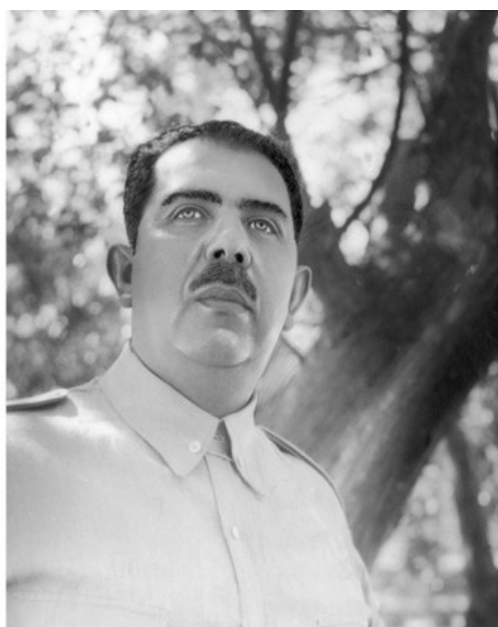


# THE NEW NO.1 BESTSELLER FROM **ANTONY BEEVOR**

OUT NOW



these addicts, and these broader pros to treat addicts as in rather than as criminals



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**Yet, despite being deemed a major success, within six months the legislation was overturned. Here, Dr Benjamin Smith investigates...**

Less than a month after the new Federal Regulation of Drug Addiction was signed into law, it had taken effect. The selling and purchasing of small amounts of drugs, including marijuana, cocaine and heroin, were effectively decriminalised. Small-scale drugs offenders were released from prison and the city's drug addiction clinics. Police officers dramatically reduced arrests for drug crimes, and half a dozen drug dispensaries were established throughout Mexico City.

Some conservative Mexican journalists thought the measure risked causing a nationwide crime wave. But, most deemed it a major success. By mid-March 1940 at least 1,000 addicts attended these dispensaries each day, buying small, controlled doses of cocaine and morphine under medical supervision and at market value. Doctors and journalists spoke out in favour of the change. "To attract [the drug addict] rather than persecute him, to register him and make him submit to medical and psychological treatment... will constitute a fundamental means of combatting addiction". So did drug addicts. A homeless heroin addict known as Rompepechos testified: "We only want that they say the truth... that they dose us according to our physical state so we can reintegrate into society and return to our jobs. Now they are doing this. Tell your readers that we are thankful to the Health Department, very thankful".

The cheap prices that these clinics offered also crippled the illegal trade. The government morphine cost 3.20 pesos a gram. On the street, the same amount of heroin cost between 45 and 50 pesos. Furthermore it was heavily diluted with lactose, carbonate of soda and quinine. A pure gram probably cost nearer 500 pesos. Such low prices undercut the dealers. Mexico City's pushers were losing 8,000 pesos a day.

Yet, within six months the legislation was overturned. On 7 June 1940 the government declared that wartime shortages of both cocaine and morphine made the scheme unworkable. The following month the old punitive legislation of 1931 was reintroduced.

The story of Mexico's brief flirtation with legalisation has a profound contemporary resonance. Over the past decade the country's war on drugs has cost the lives of an estimated 160,000 citizens. Legalisation remains a controversial issue. Yet, around the world calls for changes to drug policy are gathering pace. Experts point to the success of Portugal's experiment with decriminalization, meanwhile US states vie to collect the tax revenue from legalized marijuana. And in June this year even Britain's *Times* newspaper called for addiction to be treated as a health problem rather than a crime.

In the current international atmosphere, Mexico's 1940 policy looks curiously prescient. Yet, questions remain. Why did they legalise drugs? And if it was so successful, why did they suddenly stop?



*Display of marijuana by the US Treasury Department, c1940s. (Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo)*

## Why?

In many ways, Mexican legalisation was the brainchild of one man: Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra. A doctor by training, he studied psychiatry and neurology in France before eventually returning to Mexico. Here, in 1938, he was put in charge of Mexico City's Drug Addiction Hospital. The place was full to capacity. Like the US, Mexico imprisoned or locked up thousands of addicts each year.

Over the next two years Salazar would produce a series of academic articles and take part in press interviews that not only criticised the prohibitionist status quo but also laid out the framework for a better system.

In essence, his arguments were threefold. First, in his breakout work, *El Mito de Marijuana*, he argued that the dangers of marijuana were greatly overstated. Systematically reviewing medical studies of the drug he pointed out inaccuracies, pieces of hearsay and misapplications of the data. In one particularly powerful piece he mocked American doctors' appreciations of the drug, which he argued were based on misquotations of Charles Baudelaire's hash-inspired poetry.



*French poet Charles Pierre Baudelaire, 1821–67. (Photo by Etienne Carjat/Getty Images)*

Salazar also presented his own research on the subject conducted over seven years among a wide range of patients, including drug addicts, the insane, a handful of unsuspecting medical colleagues and politicians and even his nine-year-old nephew, who had once mistakenly smoked one of his marijuana-laced cigarettes. Salazar concluded that, irrespective of class, education or age, marijuana did little except dry the lips, redden the eyes and produce a feeling of hunger.

Second, in a series of articles and interviews with the press, Salazar argued that drug addiction should be treated as a public health problem and not as a crime. Building on his work on marijuana he claimed that there was no intrinsic link between drug addiction and criminality. In fact, it was only the high price of drugs, generated by prohibition, that led users to commit crimes, he said. Rather than stocking the prisons with users, Salazar suggested a combination of education, drug treatment and psychiatric help.

Third, Salazar suggested ending prohibition and establishing a new state-run drug monopoly. Prohibition, he argued, had generated the market for illegal drugs, and stopping drug traffickers was almost impossible. Furthermore, the illegal trade had two important supplementary consequences: it corrupted the Mexican police force, which was paid to protect the big dealers, and it pushed up prices, forcing users into crime. As a result, he reasoned, the best way to deal with drug addiction was not through prohibition, but state control. A state drug monopoly that sold drugs at wholesale prices would put the dealers out of business, reduce police corruption and allow users to feed their habits without recourse to crime.

Salazar's conclusions were ahead of their time. Based on extensive medical research and presented in an intelligent, rational and somewhat ironic manner, in many ways they echo contemporary critiques of drug policy.

## Why stop?

So, if Mexico's legalisation experiment was a success, why did it end so quickly? According to the official government statement, the constraints on morphine and cocaine imports caused by the war in Europe made the system unworkable. But, as you can imagine, there was more to the end of the experiment than this. Somewhat inevitably, it involved the United States.

Since Salazar began voicing his support for legalisation, US anti-drugs crusaders had sought to pressure the Mexican government to shut him up. John Buckley, a Texas customs man, called Salazar's plans "the outpourings of an educated nigger".

But it was puritanical head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger, who eventually put an end to the experiment. Just five days after the introduction of the law, the US state department invoked the 1935 amendments to the Law of Importation and Exportation of Narcotic Drugs. The amendments allowed the US to establish an export embargo on narcotics like morphine and cocaine when it deemed the objectives of a country to be neither medical nor scientific.



*Harry Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. (Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo)*



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Although Mexico's foreign ministry tried to argue their case, claiming that the experiment was working and was certainly more efficient than the previous punitive system, Anslinger and the US state department remained defiant. In May 1940, therefore, all exports of morphine and cocaine were stopped. Without the cooperation of war-locked German drug companies, the Mexican authorities were forced to give up.

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