

Part V

INTO THE ABYSS



1990–2020

CHAPTER 21

The Takeover

DRAGO REMEMBERED THE MEETING WELL. HE WAS in an upscale Argentine restaurant in Mexico City. He was playing bodyguard. He sat at a table next to his boss, the head of the Tijuana cartel—Benjamín Arellano Félix. The boss was there to meet one of the heads of the Mexican Attorney General's Office, the bureau nominally in charge of prosecuting drug crimes. An enormous fat man, stuffed into a dark suit, sat opposite the cartel chief.

Drago immediately dubbed him “the Whale.”

Slick and needy, the Whale clearly wanted to impress. Earning regular bribes from Arellano Félix would be enough to retire on. He asked the boss if he could choose the wine to accompany the meal. “All I need to know is your favorite fruit, the season of the year you like most, and where you might want to live. France, Italy, Chile or Australia.”

The boss was silent. He stared at the Whale. The Whale started to sweat. Arellano Félix held out his finger and beckoned the lawyer to come closer.

Do you think I flew here to talk to you about the fucking weather? Fucking fat faggot, fucking son of a whore . . . you can stick your favorite fruits up your arse. Stick a fucking pineapple up there if you want. But if you don't want me to stick a bullet up there, stop this fucking messing around and pay me some fucking attention. I don't live in France, in Italy or in Chile, nor in fucking Australia. I live here, and it's here that I have my business.

The Whale's smile disappeared. The boss continued.

You know what my business is about, so let's save this fucking bottle of wine, actually let's save this whole fucking meal, so I can save seeing your fucking Mongol face. You work for me now. You hear me? You're mine. I'm letting you meet me now just so you know who's the boss. I'm letting you meet me so you know who's your fucking daddy, you fucking chiliango faggot. I know my people spoke with you and told you what to do. I know that my people gave you money. That money was from me, you fucking shitty faggot. Don't forget. Now you eat from my hand.

A cultured wine connoisseur the Whale might have been. But a savvy observer of the shifts in narco power he was not. The Mexican drug trade had changed. More specifically, the relationship between the drug trade and the Mexican authorities had changed. And it had changed radically. Political dealmakers no longer held sway.

The Whale would learn this lesson the hard way. A few years later he reneged on his agreement with the boss. He sold out the cartel to their rivals. Drago, the bodyguard, now got new instructions. "Now don't go and pay him, put him six feet under," the boss ordered. Within a week, it was done.

For nearly eighty years the Mexican authorities—first local, then state, then federal—had protected drug traffickers from prosecution. The power dynamics of the protection rackets had stayed constant. Drug traffickers had to minimize violence, avoid U.S. scrutiny, and not sell drugs south of the border. Crossing those lines got you arrested, killed, or handed over to the gringos. Enrique Fernández had found this out; so had Pedro Avilés Pérez. Less ostentatious traffickers like Eduardo "Lalo" Fernández had not.

The Camarena murder suggested that these rules could be tested. But the subsequent investigation reinforced the reality that the Mexican state—and the U.S. drug cops—would come down on offenders brutally and effectively.

But during the 1990s the system—such as it was—broke down. Power dynamics reversed. Increased drug profits and declining state power put the narcos in control. And they—not the cops or the secret service agents—now took over running the country's drug protection rackets.

THE PRINCIPAL REASON for this change was the money. During the 1980s, Mexican traffickers had transported around a third of Colombia's cocaine into the United States. They earned big rewards. They charged the Colombian cartels between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per kilo. Pablo Acosta, for example, charged \$1,250 to deliver the product over the border at Ojinaga. Usually, he moved around 5 tons per month. It made him \$75 million a year.

But by the turn of the decade the Colombians were feeling the heat. U.S. officials had managed to shut down the Florida trafficking route almost completely. Navy patrol vessels and low-flying planes now kept a keen watch on the thin strip of sea Colombian powerboats had used to smuggle in the loads. U.S. and Colombian agents were working together to dismantle Pablo Escobar's cocaine empire. In December 1993 they completed their pursuit, shooting Escobar dead on a Medellín rooftop. And in the same year, they took down the Cali Cartel's Florida distribution network, arresting three lieutenants in quick succession. Two years later, the Colombian government reintroduced extradition for drug criminals. Getting directly linked to U.S. smuggling now risked an interminable U.S. prison sentence.

The blows were heralded as vital victories in America's overseas drug war. Yet cocaine prices never wavered. All they did was change the way the Colombians and the Mexicans did business.

The Mexicans would now take most of the risk for transporting cocaine north of the border. A Cali Cartel accountant, who gave evidence in a Miami court in 1997, explained that the new system was called "one for one." Half the cocaine now went to the Mexicans; half remained with the Colombians. By the end of the decade, the DEA

estimated that the Mexicans were now moving somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of America's coke.

DEA agents, who started to pick up on the move, were impressed by the smooth, businesslike way in which the change was made.

[The Colombians] were thinking, "How do I diminish my exposure to potential extradition? Why don't I just hand the whole thing to the Mexicans? I still make a huge amount of money and I lower my exposure to potential extradition as its no longer my kilo. I get out of the business because it is getting too much pressure to do this in the U.S. And concurrently I've still got the European market. I'm making hand over fist money in Europe, I'm making tons of money in Mexico. Let the Mexican cartels deal with the DEA and the FBI and the U.S. Customs."

The move toward wholesale cocaine trafficking coincided with shifts in transport. At first, traffickers used planes. Big planes. Former weed smuggler Amado Carrillo Fuentes got rid of his fleet of go-fast Learjets and started to buy old 727 passenger planes. He ripped out the seats and loaded the plane with 3 to 5 tons of cocaine. It soon earned him the nickname the Lord of the Skies. If a plane crashed, it was no big loss. Each cost \$300,000 or the value of around 12 kilos of cocaine—less than 0.3 percent of the next load.

But, with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the removal of trade restrictions, the traffickers also returned to moving product by land. For two years, the Americans observed the traffickers getting ready. Mexican traffickers bought up warehouses and trucking companies in the border cities. Some even hired trade consultants to work out what products got through the new border inspections more quickly. One DEA agent remarked: "They have specific issues. Does a perishable get through quicker than a load of steel? What kind of cargos gets through faster than others?"

Drug trafficking was no longer about marshaling peasant growers, perfecting sellable strains, and secreting a few kilos of sticky her-

oin in a car drive shaft. Things moved so fast that one PGR official even mocked the sinsemilla producers of the 1980s as hippy "narcologists." The modern drug business was now about riding the explosion of globalized trade, gaining comparative advantage, securing warehousing facilities, and refining transport logistics. Narcos' kids now pursued degrees in international business, not the old favorites like chemistry or agronomy.

When tariffs were removed and the border was finally opened on January 1, 1994, the traffickers were ready. Tracking down drug loads went from tough to nearly impossible. In 1995 in just Laredo, Texas, over 6 million trucks and cars crossed the border in a year; 18,000 per day. The cocaine needed to satiate America's appetite could be transported in just thirteen trucks.

Together the changes transformed the Mexican drug economy. In a stroke, they added a zero to Mexican drug profits. For every 2 kilos traffickers crossed over the border, they no longer got two \$1,000 crossing fees. Now they got the wholesale value of a kilo of cocaine on the American side. By the mid-1990s, this was around \$25,000. If they could cut it and distribute it through their own networks in U.S. cities, they could make nearly \$200,000. Two zeros more profit.

In macroterms, the effects were even more startling. During the 1980s, experts estimated that the Mexican drug trade brought in between \$2 billion and \$6 billion a year. Ten years later, the Mexican authorities now put drug earnings at around \$30 billion. It was—as they admitted—an estimate. But it valued narcotics as worth 38 percent of Mexican exports and over four times the value of the biggest legal export—oil.

The traffickers who profited from these changes were those that survived the Camarena roundups. They had some familiar backgrounds. (The new drug capitalists, like the new neoliberal capitalists, usually drew from the same small pool of elite families.)

Some were second- or third-generation smugglers from the Golden Triangle. They included weed specialists like Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo's nephew Amado Carrillo Fuentes, Pedro Avilés Pérez's nephew

Jesús Labra Avilés, and the Culiacán landowner-turned-heroin dealer Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada. Others were former *fayqueros* and border smuggling professionals like the Matamoros kingpin Juan García Abrego or the Tijuana-based Arellano Félix brothers. Others still were ex-government officials, like the old Operation Condor torturer Carlos Aguilar Garza.

The Americans grouped them together into geographical zones, gave them leaders, and called them cartels. This taxonomic, name-and-shame strategy had worked in Colombia, so why not Mexico? By the early 1990s, there was the Juárez Cartel, led by former DFS agent Rafael Aguilar Guajardo and then by Amado Carrillo Fuentes. There was the Tijuana Cartel, led by Pedro Avilés’s nephew Jesús Labra Avilés and the Arellano Félix clan. And there was the Gulf Cartel, led by Juan García Abrego.

Cartels were shorthand, a convenient fiction. They gave a name to what was a fluid, amorphous, and (though they dared not say it) unbeatable marketplace ecosystem. In its classified files if not on its press releases, the DEA’s own intelligence arm admitted that the Amado Carrillo Fuentes organization had been called many things—the Mexican Mafia, the Mexican Corporation, the Sonora Cartel, the Jalisco or Guadaluajara Cartel.” The Juárez Cartel was just the last in a long line of expedient badges. But it was not a cartel and it had no rigid hierarchy. “It functions more as a loose federation of trafficking organizations than a regimented, organized mafia group or cartel.”

No doubt only a few high-level members of the organization had really firm links to the Colombians. These individuals brought in the cocaine and smuggled some of it into the United States themselves. But they also sold a lot to smaller smugglers. They linked up with other groups to organize transport, protection, bribes, and the actual act of getting the stuff over the border. There were dozens of these small groups. The DEA, in its drive to bring order, split the Carrillo organization into five “patrones,” or bosses “responsible for decisions affecting all aspects of the federation”; nine family-run “divisions” “responsible for specific geographical, logistical or special responsibilities”; twelve

border gatekeeping groups and dozens more of what the DEA called “family syndicates,” contracted out for specific jobs and paid per kilo. Together these so-called cartels were a strange blend of the very modern and the very traditional. They were both flexible post-Fordist businesses and old-school mafias glued together by kinship, friendship, and extravagant parties.

Americans rarely penetrated these organizations. Mexicans rarely revealed them. In fact, in comparison to the Colombian cartels, we still know relatively little about them. Myths, drug war hype, and exaggerations abound. (Good network analysis tends to make poor narco-corridos.) And even those enmeshed in the everyday smuggling often remained in the dark about what other groups were doing.

But, in recent years, Mexico’s foremost investigative journalist, Abel Hernández, has managed to use a combination of court testimonies, mob lawyers, and an extraordinary jailhouse confession by the son of Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada to map out the new geography of the Mexican drug trade as well as how one of these smuggling networks actually worked.

In the late 1990s, Zambada had managed to secure a link to the Colombian cocaine producers. He contracted a maritime specialist and the brother of one of the old Guadaluajara Cartel bigwigs to go to Colombia and bring up 10-ton loads by boat to the Caribbean coastal town of Chetumal. Two other contractors then brought the cocaine overland to Mexico City, where Zambada’s brother stored the stuff in warehouses near the city’s rail depot. Here, the cocaine was divided up. One contractor, Tirso Martínez Sánchez, “the Footballer,” arranged to have the drugs shipped by train from Mexico City through Nuevo Laredo and all the way to New York. Between 1999 and 2003, Martínez admitted that he moved at least 50 tons of the stuff. (The DEA claimed that it was nearer 80 tons.)

Around 2003 this system broke down. (Martínez said in a Brooklyn court that his daughter became distressed at the bloodshed the cartel was causing.) So Zambada employed another transport expert, who stashed the cocaine in secret compartments in gasoline trucks.

This contractor then subcontracted out the actual moving of the stuff through the border at Mexicali and to Los Angeles.

Each stage of the route was priced differently depending on the mode of transport, the police presence, and the levels of bribes necessary. It cost \$6,000 to get a kilo of cocaine from Colombia to Culiacán, \$4,000 to get a kilo from Culiacán to Los Angeles, and \$9,000 to get a kilo from Culiacán to Chicago. The U.S. police and Customs inspectors in the Midwest—it seems—charged a heavy premium to look the other way.

If the money from the Colombian cocaine business changed the nature of drug smuggling, it also changed traffickers' relationship with the state. This wasn't inevitable. Had the Mexican state been financially buoyant, ideologically coherent, and politically formidable, perhaps it could have controlled the rush of cash. In the midst of another drug boom during the 1970s, it had crushed independent marijuana and heroin smugglers and forced favored traffickers to shift their drugs through the PJF-controlled plazas. The policy was brutal. Yet it had enforced a degree of control.

But by the mid-1990s, the state was markedly weaker. The economy was tumbling even before the signing of NAFTA. Real wages nearly halved over the decade.

The PRI, which had previously survived rifts and scandals with minimal political fallout, began to fracture. In 1987 many left-wing supporters left the party and followed Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of 1930s president Lázaro Cárdenas, to form a rival party. Over the next few years, economic nationalists faced off against free-trade neoliberals; political democratizers fought old-school authoritarians for the control of the PRI; and tight, elite bands waged desperate struggles to install and protect individual presidents.

These feuds spilled over into public exposés and political assassinations. In the final two years of President Salinas's reign (1988–1994) and the first two of President Zedillo's (1994–2000), there were two guerrilla uprisings, the devaluation of the peso, the shooting of the pope's representative in Mexico, the assassination of the PRI president-

tial candidate and the secretary general of the party, and the arrest of President Salinas's brother on both murder and money-laundering charges.

For decades, PRI operatives had lived by the code of "disciplina," knowing when to politick and when to shut up. In the 1990s this code went out the window. Mexico's security forces, in particular, became increasingly fragmented. By the end of the decade they were a tangle of half-measure reforms, forgettable acronyms, and bitter rivalries. There were over 1,600 state and local agencies. There was the new intelligence agency, brought in to replace the DFS (and including many of its former agents). There was the principal antinarcotics bureau, the PGR, and its agents from the PJF. There was the army, which was increasingly pulled into antinarcotics operations. And there was the litany of short-lived specialist antinarcotics forces.

Even inside the individual institutions, there were divisions. Under Salinas, the PGR had five separate directors, ranging from hard-nosed counterinsurgency torturers to the head of Mexico's human rights agency.

The PRI was not only losing control of its institutions, it was also ceding control of its territory. In 1989, the rival National Action Party (PAN) won the state governorship of Baja California; in 1992 it took Chihuahua; in 1995, Jalisco; and in 1997, Nuevo León. By the middle of the decade the PAN also controlled 225 municipalities, including a lot of the big border cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez and many of the big drugs hubs like Guadalajara and Monterrey.

Flush with cash, and faced with a one-party system in decline, Mexico's traffickers now paid off great swathes of the Mexican state and its security forces. Corruption increased in scale, reach, and political aspiration. This was no longer about gaining the protection of the local cops or the drug police *commandantes* or a nearby army commander. This was a level above even grand corruption. This was about gaining control of whole sectors of the state. It was what some political scientists termed "state capture."

The step up in the amount of money involved was eye-watering.

One 1993 study estimated that the new cocaine traffickers spent nearly \$500 million on corrupting state authorities per year. This was up from \$1.5–\$3.2 million a year just a decade earlier. Like most drug statistics, it was a napkin calculation, but it was a believable one. When federal authorities finally arrested the Matamoros trafficker Juan García Abrego in 1995, they discovered his little black book of bribes. A million dollars for the national commander of the PJJ; \$500,000 to the force's operation chief; \$100,000 to each PJJ agent stationed in Matamoros. And this was just one city and one police force.

The money now got everywhere. A lot, of course, went to the counternarcotics bureau, the PGR. Here, El Mayo Zambada's lawyer claimed that "99 percent of the officials are corrupt. There's not one that doesn't take money." (This had increased—it should be said—since the early 1990s when it was thought to be only 95 percent.) And the money went to their police enforcers, the PJJ. In fact, as the DEA observed, "smuggling organizations in the northern states of Mexico are hesitant to transport their loads within Mexico without the security of protection purchased from the PJJ."

Payoffs also overwhelmed state and local police forces. When one Ciudad Juárez smuggler joined the city's police force at the end of the decade, he found that at least a quarter of the new recruits were already members of the cartel. The local police academy was effectively a cartel training camp. You got a badge, a gun, and weapons instruction. And now you could travel to cartel hits in a squad car.

Beyond the police, the traffickers also started to pay off new groups as well. They included the military. In early 1997, Mexico's new drug czar, General José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was arrested after just three months on the job. He was found to be living in one of Amado Carrillo Fuentes's properties in Mexico City. Prosecutors revealed that they had recordings of him discussing bribes with the drug lord. More revelations followed. Someone leaked internal Ministry of Defense documents, which discussed open meetings between Carrillo and high-ranking military officials. The Americans claimed that they had evidence that at least thirty-four other officers were taking cartel money.

Traffickers also expanded their payroll to include members of leading political families. One of them allegedly was President Salinas's brother Raúl. There had been rumors about Raúl since the early 1990s when the DEA had reported that he was squirrelling away unexplained sums of money in offshore bank accounts. Carlos had managed to waylay suspicions at least temporarily by getting Raúl a gig at the University of San Diego.

If Raúl was on the take, however, he was unrepentant. He penned a dirty on the comparative ethics of corruption. ("If you rob from the many 100 percent/There could be a moral offense/A few points more, a few points less/Morality is a question of percent.") And when he returned from exile, he reportedly set about accepting bribes for protecting drug loads once again. Finally, in 1995, Swiss police captured Raúl's wife trying to withdraw \$84 million dollars from one of his bank accounts. Over the next few years, they found \$250 million in 289 separate accounts of his. They seized the funds, but he was subsequently cleared of the corruption charges, and the money was returned to him. (His wife was never charged.)

What the traffickers got for these payoffs was the usual—protection. Just on a grander scale. Local cops blocked entire stretches of rural roads to allow cocaine-packed 727s to land. Federal cops lifted roadblocks to allow smugglers' trailer trucks to pass through. Generals gave traffickers warnings about imminent raids and attempted arrests. (Most famously, in March 1997, Amado Carrillo Fuentes escaped from his sister's wedding just minutes before state forces arrived.)

But the amount of money involved also started to upend the relationship between the traffickers and the state employees. Eduardo Valle Espinosa, a former student radical pulled in to cleanse the PGR under Salinas, witnessed the system up close. He concluded that, in 1993, "Politicians are at the service of the drug traffickers" rather than the other way around. He called it not a protection racket but a "narco-democracy."

The term is probably a bit strong. The takeover was never complete. Even as the PRI crumbled, most of Mexico's institutions functioned

fairly well. There was water, electricity, and schooling. Per capita income continued to outpace most developing countries. The transition from single-party dominance to competitive multiparty elections was comparatively smooth and peaceful.

The narco takeover was also gradual and uneven. Some claimed control passed to the cartels as early as 1989, when Félix Gallardo allegedly got together his fellow traffickers at a mafia meeting in Acapulco to divvy up Mexico's drug plazas. That year the PAN won the governorship of Baja California Norte, and key crossing points like Tijuana and Mexicali were now out of PRI hands. Yet Félix Gallardo always denied that he did this. He claimed that the government still allocated the plazas.

Whether narcos or the government led the allocation, it was clear that by early 1993 a radical realignment had occurred. There was a cull of the former PJF and DFS agents that had moved into the drug trade. Plaza bosses like former Operation Condor torturer Carlos Aguilar Garza and Ciudad Juárez kingpin Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, were murdered. So were other major traffickers and a bunch of Félix Gallardo's relatives. The shift also tied in with politics. In 1992 the PRI also lost control of the governorship of Chihuahua and the crucial crossing corridor of Ciudad Juárez.

Whatever the exact timeline, by the mid-1990s drug traffickers—not the state—ran the protection rackets at the plazas. They demanded fees to move product through, and it was their armed forces, not the PJF or the DFS, who took out the independent smugglers.

The importance of the shift cannot be underestimated. It capsized eight decades of state drug policy. It outsourced drug protection to the traffickers themselves. The taxed became the tax collectors.

Yet it also did much more. Controlling territory had a series of unintended side effects. They would become increasingly evident over the next two decades. To run citywide protection rackets, traffickers now needed more gunmen. They started to outsource violence to local cops, deserting soldiers, local mobs, and cross-border gangs. The Tijuana Cartel pioneered the move, welding together a strange mix of

San Diego thugs and Tijuana posh kids into Arellano Félix's private army. Then Carrillo siphoned off a group of Ciudad Juárez cops to form his group. First they were known as "the Little Trees"; then they became "the Line." The Gulf Cartel upped the ante once more. From 1997 on, they recruited members of the Mexican army special forces. This group became known as the Zetas.

These changes radically increased the violence connected with the drug trade. State agents had rarely held back when extorting payoffs (especially when the PJF took over in the 1970s). And conflicts between state institutions for control of the rackets were frequent. But there were limits. As the former racketeers were policemen, punishment for not paying bribes could mean prison time, not simply torture or death. And really bad cops could be sacked, arrested, or even killed. Even the president's friend, Arturo "El Negro" Durazo had been arrested. There were clear rewards for showing just a little bit of restraint.

By the mid-1990s, these incentives were disappearing. And so was the restraint.

Big traffickers now used their own hitmen or local cops to round up small-time smugglers and make them pay a fee for moving product through their plaza. The reluctant were tortured. And those who refused were killed. The fee was called the *derecho de piso* (best translated as the "right to work"). The term had been used by the PJF to denote the bribe paid for any illegal activity. In Mexico, underworld slang came from inside the state.

In Baja California Norte, if you were caught bringing drugs into the ports of Ensenada or Rosarito or at the border crossings at Tijuana, Mexicali, or Tecate, you were kidnapped and shot in the back of the head. Local journalists estimated that the Arellano Félix gang killed between 100 and 200 a year. They were mostly small-scale weed smugglers from the south of Mexico. Many could not even be identified. In 2001 alone, doctors had to bury at least 40 bodies in unmarked graves.

Occasionally, the press took note. In 1997, the *New York Times* reported that an El Paso NGO had recorded over fifty disappearances

in the past three years. Two years later, FBI agents working with Mexican investigators started to uncover bodies on a nearby ranch. And in 2004, they uncovered another hidden graveyard with the remains of a dozen bodies. The municipal police admitted in private that “the desert surrounding Juárez is a vast cemetery, a huge mausoleum full of corpses.”

Quantifying any of this, even vaguely, is borderline impossible. There were no drug murder counts at the time. Most bodies were hidden. And corrupt cops reclassified those that were found as the victims of manslaughter or crimes of passion. The sole aim of the chief of the Tijuana murder squad in the mid-1990s was to “distract attention from the Arellano Félix cartel.” The chief even came up with a sharp saying that distilled his investigative approach. “*Si quieres llegar a ser agente viejo . . . hazte pendejo*” (If you want to get to be an old agent . . . act like a fucking idiot).

As a result, estimates of drug-connected deaths were sketchy at best. The best approximation suggests that from 1997 on, these trafficker-controlled protection rackets were killing around 350 small peddlers a year. It was an alarming upsurge. Yet it was soon forgotten. Within a decade, there were similar numbers of murders committed in a month just in a single Mexican city.

CHAPTER 22

Wars

GROUND ZERO WAS NUEVO LAREDO. THOUGH IT HAD barely 300,000 residents, the city was the principal transport route for over a third of the border’s trade. Over 3,700 trucks crossed a day. In a year they carried \$90 billion worth of goods over the Rio Bravo, up Interstate 35 to Dallas and then beyond, throughout the Eastern Seaboard. Nuevo Laredo was also the entry point, DEA agents claimed, for over half the U.S.’s cocaine.

Hostilities took off at the end of 2004. Police discovered five bodies in a safe house in an upscale neighborhood of the city. The victims had been blindfolded, bound, tortured, and shot in the head. Beside them the killers laid two pieces of cardboard. They were a challenge. They read, “This message is for you, ‘Chapo’ Guzmán, and for you, Arturo Beltrán Leyva” and “Send more idiots for us to kill.”

By the beginning of 2005, a new, more brutal drug war had arrived in Nuevo Laredo. Sinaloa gunmen under Guzmán and Beltrán Leyva confronted the Gulf Cartel’s armed wing, the Zetas. Over the next year, the homicide rate tripled. Over the following six months, it doubled again. Bodies were strung from underpasses and dumped by the sides of the roads; messages were scrawled on cardboard notices and painted on sheets; victims were mutilated; journalists were murdered; and police chiefs were cut down in the street. Four were killed in just one year.

In March 2005 hundreds of federal police and soldiers arrived in the city. Killings continued nevertheless. Local cops met the feds with

a barrage of bullets and the feds had to fight their way into the city. Later that year the entire local police force was sacked for being on the Gulf Cartel's payroll.

Yet the move seemed to do little. On July 28, 2005, gunmen from both cartels exchanged gunfire, grenades, and bazooka missiles in the city's biggest shopping complex. The confrontation lasted thirty minutes. Yet neither the federal nor the local forces intervened. By the time they reached the battlefield, both groups of gunmen had removed their dead and wounded.

New fronts in the new drug war opened up at speed. Murder rates suddenly leapt along the border in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. Tactics changed. In December 2005, a U.S. newspaper released a short homemade movie clip. In a dark room in the southern beach resort of Acapulco, members of the Sinaloa Cartel questioned four alleged Zetas. At the end of the clip, they shot them in the head. It was the first narco video. Compared to what was to come, it was distinctly PG.

New organizations now burst on the scene armed not just with high-caliber weapons but also with prepacked political creeds and religious messages. In September 2006, a Sinaloa-linked group tossed the heads of five Zetas into a Michoacán bar. The note declared that the group was the Familia Michoacana. "The family does not kill for money. It does not kill women or innocent people. Those who die are those who must die. Everyone should know that this is divine justice."

Over the next six years, the conflict in Nuevo Laredo was repeated throughout much of Mexico. Conflicts gained a depressing rhythm. Certain cartels would begin fighting in a particular state or city. The conflicts involved a combination of extended shootouts, increasingly horrific forms of mutilation and torture, the public display of bodies or their complete disappearance. Politicians—and particular policemen—were often the targets of the violence. And so were journalists and media workers. And what started off as localized clashes often spiraled into killings and political assassinations half a country away.

During the Nuevo Laredo clashes, President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) was a reluctant drug warrior. Mexico's first president from the

conservative, probusiness PAN, he was also the country's first leader to come from outside the PRI for over fifty years. A good-time rather than a wartime leader, he didn't want conflict. So he was reluctant to send more than a few hundred police and soldiers to the border.

The next president, Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), had few such reservations. He was elected with only the slimmest of margins and limited legitimacy. Supporters of his rival were still camped out in Mexico City, claiming electoral fraud. Calderón had so little legitimacy he was forced to sneak into the Congress through the back door at his inauguration.

Calderón needed a mission. Something to unite the country behind his rule. He chose the war on drugs. On December 11, 2006, he sent 6,500 troops into his home state of Michoacán. Soon afterward he sent another 7,000 soldiers to Acapulco and over 3,000 to Tijuana. By the peak of the campaign around 50,000 troops and the entire federal police force was involved in combating traffickers.

The Americans backed Calderón. They lent over a billion dollars to equip the army and the federal police with the latest guns, the newest helicopters, and the most advanced technology. They also sent hundreds of DEA and ICE agents south to infiltrate Mexican cartels, turn informants, and share information with the Mexicans.

Calderón played the wartime president. He flew to a military base in Michoacán, donned army fatigues, and urged soldiers "to persevere until victory is achieved. . . . We will give no quarter to the enemies of Mexico." Despite the trappings of the role, Calderón was less than convincing; he was a diminutive, balding man and with none of the easygoing charm voters looked for in a political strongman.

Commentators still disagree whether Calderón's policy was the product of firm belief or rank opportunism or, as I suspect, a mixture of the two. (As a right-wing Catholic, zeal and pragmatism were never mutually exclusive.) But all agree it was an unmitigated disaster. The government crackdown intersected with trafficker conflicts and local struggles in strange and destructive ways. Cartels faced off against cartels; cartels faced off against soldiers and police; and some soldiers and police linked up with cartels to eliminate their rivals.

Drug-related murders rose rapidly. Between 2006 and 2012, experts estimated that there were as many as 65,000. Journalists observed that, in the same time period, civilian deaths in Mexico outpaced those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Soon the number surpassed that of U.S. casualties in the Vietnam War. (Though, it should be said, it was far fewer than the estimated 3 million Vietnamese killed.) It was the death rate of a low-intensity war or, perhaps better, a series of low-intensity wars.

The violence was unprecedented in both scale and volume. For over sixty years, since the land-reform and religious conflicts of the 1930s, Mexican murder rates had been in steady decline. At the turn of the century, they were around the same as the United States during the 1980s. Calderón's drug war upended such progress. The murder rate more than doubled in just five years.

And it overshadowed Mexico's other brief periods of drug war violence. During the 1970s, at the height of Operation Condor, deaths from drug violence never exceeded a thousand a year; they were probably nearer to a few hundred. From 2006 on, drug-related deaths often surpassed a thousand in just a month. During the 1990s, when cartels first started to war for control of trafficking plazas, murders were vicious and frequent. But they rarely outstripped an average of one a day. Now they averaged over one per hour.

FOR OVER A decade, politicians, academics, and journalists have sought to understand this violence. Political science has met true crime. Discussion of the murderous logic of kingpins now rubs shoulders with graphs of localized Mexican homicide rates, 3-D charts of cartel behavior, and complex regression analyses. They dot academic journals. They fill the schedules of new think tanks and scholarly centers. Drug prohibition, it seems, has generated yet another industry.

Researchers point to several changes that help explain the scale of the new conflicts. Shifts in American drug tastes changed the geography of Mexico's drug trade once more. Cocaine was a boom-time

narcotic. But with the 2008 financial crash, the boom time ended. Cocaine users nearly halved overnight. U.S. users now switched to marijuana, methamphetamines, and increasingly, opiates. More and more Americans had been turning to heroin after the federal ban on prescribing opiate-based pain medications in 2003. In the next decade, heroin use tripled.

To meet the need for marijuana and opiates, traffickers returned to their old haunts in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental, where they teamed up with local village leaders in states like Nayarit, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Oaxaca to produce acres of poppies and weed. Potent, artisan-made black tar heroin, produced in rural cook shops, returned to U.S. streets. By 2014, the DEA estimated, Mexico had over 26,000 hectares devoted to poppy production. It produced 50 tons of heroin per year. It was ten times what Mexicans had produced during the 1970s. And it was killing around ten times as many Americans.

Traffickers also moved to control access to west coast ports like Lázaro Cárdenas and Manzanillo. Here they imported pseudoephedrine from Asia to make into methamphetamine. Outside the ports in the villages of Michoacán and Colima, you could smell the acrid stink of meth wafting out of small hillside shacks.

The other big change that worsened the violence was the availability of guns. In 2004, President George W. Bush ended the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act. The act had prevented the sale of semiautomatic assault weapons to civilians. Lifting the ban generated a global boom in gun manufacture and gun sales. Many were sold to U.S. citizens. But many were also smuggled south to arm Mexico's cartels.

Mexico, since the 1970s, had gun laws very different from those of the United States. They were some of the strictest in the world. The country had a single gun shop located on a military base. And to get a gun license, a Mexican citizen needed to pass a series of stringent background checks with the Ministry of Defense. To circumvent these laws, traffickers went shopping north of the border. There were over

6,000 gun stores in the American Southwest. They were all within less than an hour's drive of the border.

Quite how many guns these stores sold to the cartels, no one really knew. (Asking this kind of thing was deemed unconstitutional.) In 2013 the United Nations suggested that there were over 20,000 being smuggled into Mexico per year. The U.N. number was probably an underestimate. Between December 2006 and July 2010 the Mexican forces confiscated 85,511 weapons. Ninety percent came from the United States. And whatever the numbers, these new imports were certainly having an effect. Homicides caused by guns accounted for just 15 percent of Mexico's murders in 1997. Twenty years later, they made up two-thirds.

If smuggling drugs had gotten easier, so had smuggling guns. And if the drug trade was killing Americans, the gun trade was now killing Mexicans. It was the borderlands version of Newton's third law of motion.

Changes in American narcotics demands and the gun market were significant, but scholars also point to other changes that began in Mexico.

For the first time since the Mexican Revolution, drug traffickers started to sell drugs in bulk to the domestic drug market. The move probably started in Baja California, where smugglers connected to the Arellano Félix brothers began to establish small *tienéttas*, or drug shops. They sold meth, marijuana, and cocaine. But local trade spread across the length of the border. By 2008, cocaine and its derivatives had replaced inhalants as Mexicans' drug of choice. Over 2 percent of Mexicans regularly took the product, a tenfold increase in just over twenty years.

Drug use was focused in tourist areas (like Cancún and Acapulco) and in the border cities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Matamoros. In Ciudad Juárez, the shooting galleries pioneered by La Nacha had expanded from a few hundred to around 2,000. They fed an estimated 150,000 addicts, or a rather staggering 10 percent of the city's popu-

lation. In poorer barrios, crack pipes, coke wraps, and syringes now littered the streets. But it wasn't just in the big cities. By the end of the decade, a person could go to the outskirts of any small town and pick up hard drugs for personal use with relative ease. Cartel gunmen from rural Michoacán frequently mentioned the welcome anesthetizing effects of meth, marijuana, or even heroin.

Small local drug gangs, often only nominally attached to the larger trafficking networks, started to fight over control of drug selling areas. Corner dealers, tit-for-tat murders, and drive-by shootings increased.

But perhaps the most devastating change to criminal practices had precious little to do with drugs at all.

During the Calderón presidency, the more entrepreneurial gangs moved beyond narcotics completely. Instead, they took the practice of running protection rackets, which they had taken over from the state during the 1990s, and started to apply it to all manner of illicit and licit businesses. Those that controlled the regional rackets, or "plazas," no longer exclusively charged the old drug smugglers. Now they imposed protection fees on any commercial venture from selling knockoff DVDs, to vending medicines, to farming avocados. And as these regional rackets no longer needed narcotics, they spread from the old smuggling and growing zones to cover most of country.

The Gulf Cartel's enforcers, the Zetas, led the way. The Zetas were what one security expert has called "a point of infection" for Mexican organized crime. Traffickers had been employing bodyguards since at least the 1980s. But the Zetas were something different. They weren't local paramilitaries (like the Guadalupe gang). And they weren't local police (like the Ciudad Juárez gang) or local posh kids (like the Tijuana mob).

They were violence professionals. And, more important, they weren't local; they had no ties or allegiances to the places they commanded. It was just territory to exploit. Most were former members of the Mexican special forces, or GAFE. They came from the army's traditional recruiting zones of southern and central Mexico. In 1997 they had

been sent to work as federal cops on the northeastern border. But they had either resigned or deserted and instead joined the Gulf Cartel as bodyguards.

As the conflicts increased, the reputation of the Zetas grew to monstrous proportions. Stories abounded. Some were the products of the organization's secrecy; others, twisted propaganda; others, flat-out fabrications. At their core, there were 30, or 40, or 50 original GAFE operatives. (One observer remarked that they increased "like Gremlins," multiplying not with water but rather by contact with government rhetoric.) They were recruiting Guatemalan military death squads. They were hiring Gurkhas. They were running training camps manned by Mossad agents. They were an intercontinental death cult, worshipping the skeletal figure of the Santa Muerte (Saint Death), feeding their victims to caged tigers, or to their leader, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano. ("All that was missing was Darth Vader," the same observer remarked.)

Setting such myths aside, the Zetas did popularize a spectacularly violent new way of making money. At first, they stayed within the traditions of Mexican trafficking groups—at least those established during the 1990s. They simply started to extend the drug protection rackets into new areas. They began in the northeast, charging local smugglers fees for moving drugs through regions they controlled. Then they moved south, to the ports and cities along the Caribbean coast, where independent gangs brought in cocaine in high-powered boats. And they went west to the weed- and opium-growing areas of Guerrero and Michoacán. Locals were shocked.

They said that anyone who grew marijuana had to pay them. People in my part of the mountains are tough and a lot of them told these men to fuck themselves. And then bodies started appearing on the streets. And people started paying up.

But soon the Zetas moved away from narcotics. It made sense. They weren't traffickers. They had limited contacts with Colombian cocaine

exporters, or Asian chemical magnates, or Chicago street gangs. And they had little of the patience, skill, or business sense that putting together a narcotics network demanded.

Instead, they specialized in what they were good at—protection rackets. And they started to enforce protection rackets on all sorts of businesses. They started with the illegal ones. Units of ten to fifteen Zetas descended on cities throughout Mexico. They met the local car thieves, the illegal loggers, the CD and DVD pirates, the housebreakers, the kidnapers, and the local policemen, who had previously taken a cut of such businesses. They now ordered these groups to pay the Zetas a monthly fee. Those that refused or were unable to pay were killed.

The scheme was quick, efficient, and brutal. In 2007, Zetas arrived in the commercial center of Torreón. They immediately kidnapped a local police chief and filmed him listing the city's illegal enterprises. The chief was never seen again. They then sent a letter—together with the film—to local business representatives. Anyone the police chief mentioned was now ordered to pay off the Zetas. Those that refused were threatened with "irreversible consequences."

Next, the Zetas moved to the licit world. They tracked down shopkeepers, farmers, and small business owners and demanded that they also pay regular fees. These were often small—between 200 and 500 pesos. Yet they could build up, especially after the economic crash of 2008, and especially when nearly half of Mexicans earned less than 600 pesos a week. And again, the punishments for nonpayment were brutal. Burly men armed with semiautomatics now visited car mechanics in small-town Michoacán, taxi drivers in Veracruz, or cantina owners in Oaxaca City in the middle of the night and demanded a cut of the profits.

If not, they said they would kill my wife and my children. Then they would kill me. I knew they weren't joking. They had already disappeared a lot of others.

During the 2000s, the Zetas started to extend protection rackets over both licit and illicit businesses. This letter was sent to a prominent Torreón lawyer. It demands that the businessmen of the region meet the Zetas' demands or face the consequences.



The Zetas soon found that the most vulnerable were the easiest to squeeze. They were also the least risky; the chance of any comeback was essentially zero. In San Fernando, near the Mexico-Texas border they set up an extortion production line. They employed the local police to drag the Central American migrants off the buses that crossed the town. Or they scoured the streets of Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo looking for recent deportees. They brought these victims back to San Fernando, where they beat them, cut them, tied them to the back of trucks, and dragged them through the streets. They forced them to phone their relatives and demand money for their release. Those that couldn't pay were killed or sold as prostitutes or forced to become cartel lookouts.

Highway 101, which passed through San Fernando, became known as the “highway of death.” In 2010 the authorities found 72 dead migrants on a farm in the area. They had all been shot in the head. Less than a year later, they uncovered another 193 bodies dumped into a dozen hastily dug graves.

The importance of this change in criminal practices should not be underestimated. In less than a decade the Zetas extended the old drug protection rackets first to other criminals and then to everyday citizens. By the middle of Calderón’s reign, they were alleged to extract fees in at least half of the country’s states.

Other criminal groups soon adopted similar tactics. Even the Zetas’ opponents took note. The Familia Michoacana had announced its arrival by hurling five Zetas’ heads onto a bathroom floor and declaring that it was firmly against such indiscriminate extortion. Yet within less than a year it was doing exactly the same. At one point, analysts estimated that criminals were charging protection from as many as 85 percent of Michoacán licit businesses from small stores and lime farms through to large multinational mining conglomerates. By 2012 that old plaza term—the *derecho de piso*, or fee—had become general Mexican slang. Everyone knew someone who was paying.

As the criminals diversified and the protection rackets spread, the violence increased. During the Calderón era, tens of thousands of murders were listed as “drug-related.” Yet all this really meant was that the presumed perpetrators had at least a passing interest in the drug trade. The motive was increasingly unlikely to concern access to narcotics or trafficking corridors. Instead, it was frequently about the messy business of extracting protection money.

Yet, if the bloodshed of the past fifteen years has been shaped by recent changes to drug markets, firepower, and patterns of everyday crime, it also has longer-term roots. The two triggers for the sudden explosions of violence that wracked border cities like Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, and Ciudad Juárez and caused the majority of drug-related homicides were the same triggers that had been causing drug violence for nearly a century. They were the struggle between powerful groups

for the control of particular drug protection rackets and the pursuit of aggressive counternarcotics policing.

No doubt, as before, these had their own stand-alone consequences. But these factors now mixed and intertwined on a grander scale, in more damaging ways, and in a compound fashion. Struggles between rival groups sparked aggressive policing; and aggressive policing, in turn, generated increasing struggles between rival groups.

As violence increased, both Mexican and American police services put increasing pressure on drug traffickers to inform on other traffickers. Such a strategy had been part of drug policing for decades. But now the authorities repeatedly employed the tactic despite knowing that the consequences could be catastrophic.

The authorities called the strategy “divide and conquer.” At best, police forces felt that they were taking advantage of existing divisions; they were arresting or assassinating traffickers who would soon be dead anyway. Those who got in the way—or were killed as suspected informants—were unfortunate collateral.

At worst, it was the Mexican and the U.S. authorities that were deliberately causing many of the divisions between trafficking groups. And once these fissures had been exposed, they effectively wedged them open. Divisions encouraged informants, which in turn generated high-level arrests. Divisions delivered up kingpins, they secured the funding for institutions, and they made careers. Those who got in the way—or were killed as suspected informants—were traffickers anyway. As long as they coughed up their networks before they died, who cared?

PERHAPS THE BEST way to illustrate how old and new forces interlinked in potent and destructive ways is to look closely at the conflict that devastated Ciudad Juárez in the last years of the decade.

In late 2007, gunmen from the Sinaloa Cartel started to arrive in Ciudad Juárez. Their mission—to take over the city’s drug protection

racket, or plaza. They numbered at least 500 and squatted in dozens of half-finished houses in the sprawling slums to the south and west. They called themselves “the New Arrivals” and they started by killing the Juárez Cartel’s enforcers. These were dubbed “the Line” and most—as they had been under Amado Carrillo Fuentes—were still local cops.

By the end of January 2008, the New Arrivals made their intentions clear. Sinaloa gunmen exited a dark sedan, walked up to the city’s monument to dead police officers, and placed two white poster boards at the foot of the statue. On one they wrote, “For those who did not believe.” Beneath were the names of 5 dead “the Line” policemen. On the other, they wrote, “For those who still do not believe.” Beneath were the names of 17 more Ciudad Juárez cops. This became known as “the black list,” a register of intended victims.

Shootouts between the New Arrivals and the Line became frequent. On February 23, 2008, cameras beamed a firefight live on TV. It was in broad daylight on one of the city’s main streets. Gunmen fired .50-caliber machine guns at each other as they crouched behind cars or ducked behind the doors of the family restaurants that lined the street. Off-camera, there were also kidnappings and murders. The federal police that raided drugs and arms stashes would often find corpses, partially dissolved in slaked lime, buried in hastily dug graves out back.

Both the Sinaloa and the Juárez Cartels increasingly swelled their ranks with young members of the city’s smaller gangs. There were over 500 of these organizations, from relatively large cross-border groups like Los Aztecas to smaller cliques that barely covered a city block like “the Fucked Up.” The cartels gave these new recruits high-powered guns, a measure of protection, and an enemy to attack. The intercartel conflict quickly meshed with and transformed into dozens of small-scale fights. The kind of everyday beefs over girls, over tagging walls, and over who sold weed where now became bloody conflicts.

To try to quell the violence, Calderón reacted according to script and sent in troops and federal police. They only made the situation worse.

Immediately, murders leapt up. Locals thought the soldiers as dangerous as the traffickers: they dubbed them “the military cartel.” There were immediate accusations of torture, arbitrary detention, forced entry, property damage, and disappearances. And there were rumors of army-run death squads targeting the small local gangs and committing “social cleansing.” Most commonly, soldiers dragged suspects from their houses, took them to the base, and proceeded to demand information by dunking their heads underwater, shocking them with Tasers, or covering their heads with plastic bags. In 2009 alone, there were 1,400 human rights complaints. One community spokesman declared, “Abu Ghraib would be a kindergarten compared to the military camp here in Ciudad Juárez.”

The lucky ones were forced to confess and handed over to the police. But many didn't return at all. On December 29, 2009, troops dragged away José Angel Alvarado Herrera and his cousin, Nirza Paola Alvarado, outside their house. Later, their relatives asked for their whereabouts at the local military base. But the soldiers refused to acknowledge taking them. On February 3, 2010, Nirza phoned her parents and got out the words, “Help me, get me out of here, I'm still alive” before being cut off. It was the last they heard of her.

The federal police were just as bad. Under security chief Genaro García Luna, the organization grew. In 2006 there were 6,500 federal cops; by 2012 there were 37,000. They were more educated than ever before (8,000 had university degrees!); they were better armed; and they were better organized. But their tactics were distinctly old-school. Human rights abuses climbed almost in lock step with increasingly numbers. They were the usual litany of torture, threats, attacks on family members, false imprisonment, attacks on property, and murder.

One Juárez woman, who had escaped to the United States, told me how police had stormed her house in March 2009. They were looking for her husband, a former cop and a suspected trafficker. They grabbed her two-year-old child off the bed, held him by the leg, and dangled him headfirst over the bath. They threatened to drown him if she

didn't reveal her husband's whereabouts. When she went to complain to the local human rights office, the same cops tracked her down and arrested her. They picked up her brother at the same time. She never saw him again.

How many of the bodies slung onto Ciudad Juárez trash heaps or secreted in hidden graves in the desert were put there by the military or the police?

Aside from the trauma for the victims and their families, Calderón's strategy of aggressive policing also created and cemented divisions between trafficking groups. Threatened with capture, torture, or assassination, many Mexican traffickers now decided that the safest policy was to work—at least in part—with the authorities. It became less of a hasty survival mechanism and more of a studied combat strategy. They sent out emissaries to U.S. and Mexican agencies and employed informers to snitch on their enemies.

The group that was most successful at pursuing this strategy was the Sinaloa Cartel. So while Sinaloa gunmen were assassinating Ciudad Juárez's small-time dealers, cartel hitmen, and local cops, the Sinaloa chiefs—Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada—were also cooperating with the authorities.

In general, they used Guzmán's lawyer, Humberto Loya Castro, to leak the information to the U.S. and the Mexican agents. They began this strategy as early as the 1990s, selling out the rival Arellano Félix brothers in return for limited state interference. Zambada's son explained the system:

[El Chapo said] that Loya was with the DEA with his permission and that all they were doing, all the detentions and all of that was on the information of him and my father, and that it was the DEA that acted together with the Mexican government.

As the pressure increased, the Sinaloa chiefs also used this system to fight the war in Ciudad Juárez. They employed a former city police captain to operate as an intermediary between their organization and U.S.

agents. He gave the authorities the names of corrupt fellow cops and Juárez cartel killers. The authorities then either arrested or killed them.

And when the pressure got too much, the Sinaloa chiefs used the strategy to turn on their own associates. Zambada's son even started to give intel to the DEA. The cooperation allowed the Calderón government to make dozens of high-level arrests. They included members of the Juárez cartel, former Arellano Félix hitmen, independent Culiacán smugglers, and even—so the rumors went—Guzmán's own cousin, Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, who was arrested in January 2008.

Yet the strategy had devastating secondary effects. Selling out allies like Beltrán Leyva may have appeased the drug hawks, who captured another kingpin. And it may have kept Zambada and Guzmán out of jail. But it also started another round of bloody conflicts. Zambada and Guzmán now not only confronted the Juárez Cartel and the Zetas but also the Beltrán Leyva brothers. New struggles involved new fronts, and fighting broke out in Sinaloa and in the Beltrán Leyva stronghold of Acapulco.

The strategy also led to repeated accusations—first by rival cartels, then by journalists—of a tacit agreement between the Sinaloa Cartel and the authorities. According to these charges, the authorities were doing the Sinaloa Cartel's dirty work, and they were probably taking Sinaloa bribes in order to do so. Such accusations eventually culminated in the arrest of Calderón's chief security official, Genaro García Luna, by U.S. agents in 2019.

García Luna currently awaits trial. But whether the former security chief is personally guilty or not, there is no doubt that many officials did take Sinaloa money. Why not take a life-changing sum of cash to follow a tip-off and arrest a killer?

Yet, in reality, such collusion was not simply a matter of money or corruption. It was embedded in the process of drug war policing. To get arrests, you needed informants. To get informants you essentially had to back one group against another. And when rivalries didn't exist, you needed to create them.

Divide and conquer. What looked like intercartel struggles were often just extensions of drug policing. It was the drug war's dirty little secret. It was covered up by the traffickers, who didn't want to reveal themselves as snitches. And it was covered up by the authorities, who didn't want to unmask themselves as the authors of so much of the resulting bloodshed.

This combination of cartel conflicts over protection rackets, gang fights, and aggressive policing generated what the Ciudad Juárez mayor called “a perfect storm.” The homicide rate skyrocketed. Murders increased from just over 200 in 2007 to 1,580 in 2008. By 2010 there were 3,798. It was a homicide rate of 272 per 100,000. Only two cities had ever outpaced the border city's murder rate—Medellín in the 1990s and Baghdad in 2006.

The subsequent conflict between the Sinaloa kingpins and the Beltrán Leyva brothers generated similar upsurges. In May 2008 the brothers' gunmen murdered Guzmán's son Édgar Guzmán López in a Culiacán parking lot. And over the next six months the official number of homicides in Sinaloa increased threefold. Hundreds more were kidnapped, killed, and buried in unmarked graves.

EPILOGUE

Drugs and Violence

ISELA REMEMBERS THE DAY THEY CAME. “IT WAS April 3 [2014]. It was my daughter’s birthday.” They rode into the suburb on the edge of Acapulco in the back of Ford F-150s; they wore ski masks and carried automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. One had a pistol in his belt. Isela and her family were sitting around the table in the back of their small shop. It was early evening and they had just finished singing the Mexican version of “Happy Birthday”: “Las Mañanitas.” They were divvying up her daughter’s favorite dessert, a tres leches cake.

They heard the sound of engines outside the shop. Isela thought it was probably one of the neighbors showing off a new car. But suddenly two men burst into the shop. The family dog barked a frightened warning. One man raised his pistol and shot the dog dead. “It was so loud, so unexpected, we all screamed.” He looked around the shop, spied the fridge full of cold *caguamas* (liter beers) and proceeded to stuff them into a rucksack. The other man walked toward the family. “We are La Maña; we own this place now. You pay us, not the government, not the army, not that fat fuck Beto. You pay us. Now where’s the fucking money?” Isela’s father pointed to a metal box up on one of the shelves. The man emptied the contents into his pocket; then they left.

La Maña (the Knack or the Skill) was the local slang for what security analysts and drug agents precisely termed the Independent Cartel of Acapulco or CIDA. The group appeared in their formal charts and intricate color-coded maps. They claimed that it was an offshoot of the

southern branch of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, and it was now fighting for control of the drug trade with other groups, including “the Reds” and “the Squirrels.”

But for Isela and her family, it was just La Maña. It was both less defined and more terrifying. It was manned by a group of street kids and drunks; it was run by “El Chino,” a young, tattooed man rumored to be a former soldier; and it was involved in a turf war with a former policeman also known as “that fat fuck Beto.” Isela was never privy to the inner logic of El Chino or La Maña, but the goal didn’t seem to be some prized drug transshipment route or even control of the suburb’s drug retail market. “I didn’t know anyone who did drugs. Everyone in the Colonia Altamira, we were just young families.”

For Isela the goal seemed to be extortion, or more precisely, the monopoly control of the suburb’s extortion racket.

From then on La Maña had the derecho de piso. They charged everyone, shop owners, businessmen, truck drivers, even the schools had to pay. And if you didn’t pay, they gave you one chance and then they killed you . . . just like that.

At this point, Isela started to choke up. Her husband, Luis, who was also sitting in the Oakland lawyer’s office, took up the story.

They wanted so much. First it was 500 pesos [a week]. Then they found out that we also had a commercial oven, so they wanted 1000 pesos. Then they demanded 10,000 pesos. They said that they would leave us alone afterwards. But where were we going to get 10,000 pesos from?

On October 6, 2014, Luis, his two cousins, and his brother left the shop to go into the center of Acapulco. They were going to pick up a part for the oven. Just before they got to the end of the road, a Ford F-150 pulled up beside them. One masked man stuck his head out of the window. “We’re going to fuck you up for not paying.” Then

there was the noise; the deafening sound of automatic gunfire. Luis still has no memory of what happened next. When he woke up, he was in the hospital with a bullet in his stomach and another in his arm. His cousins were also gravely wounded. His brother had been shot dead at the scene.

AFTER 2012, THE Mexican government employed the same militarized counternarcotics policies as President Calderón. And they had the same effects. Soldiers killed civilians; trafficking groups became increasingly divided. Divide and conquer. As Isela discovered, these smaller gangs were still termed cartels. But now they mostly engaged in other forms of crime. In fact, by the mid-2010s the everyday violence that most Mexicans experienced had little to do with the drug trade at all.

And despite government tactics, the flow of drugs northward continued unabated. Incentives remained high; the demand for opiates in particular boomed. And traffickers adapted to the shifting U.S. market, moving smoothly from marijuana to heroin to the synthetic opiate fentanyl. For American addicts, it is as if the drug war never happened. Now it is cheaper and easier to get high than ever before.

IN 2012, VOTERS kicked out the PAN and elected a president from the old PRI party. A slick, photogenic politician, married to a soap star, Enrique Peña Nieto also had a prestigious heritage. He was close to the former president Carlos Salinas and part of the Atlacomulco group, a famed inner circle of well-connected and politically able PRI apparatchiks. Many anticipated that such contacts would help the president negotiate a new status quo with the country’s trafficking organizations.

At first, hopes were high. Peña Nieto promised to focus on the reduction of violence rather than the elimination of drug trafficking. He cut the overt links between his administration and the U.S. drug police. And he ended the shrill anticartel rhetoric that had marked

Calderón's regime. He wore suits, not ill-fitting army fatigues. He concentrated on pushing ambitious new education and petroleum laws through Congress.

Initially, the approach seemed to work; homicides didn't halve as Peña Nieto promised. But they did decrease by 15 percent during his first year. (Though some cynics speculated that officials were massaging the figures and gunmen were simply burying the bodies deeper.) In public, newspapers lauded the new president's regime. In February 2014, *Time* magazine even published a front cover of a beaming Peña Nieto with the words "Saving Mexico" across his chest. Off the front pages, even security experts seemed impressed. They pointed knowingly to the Colombian officials who had "beaten" the Colombian cartels and now advised Peña Nieto.

Yet such hopes were short-lived. Whatever political skills Peña Nieto's allies brought, they relied on the same defunct institutions and the same tired, counterproductive strategies.

Mexico's security forces were particularly ill suited to any kind of peacekeeping role. Initial proposals to reform the police and create a new national gendarmerie failed almost immediately. Big plans to bring in 40,000 young recruits were shelved; and when the new institution eventually took to the streets in 2014, it consisted of little more than 5,000 former cops. Initiatives to bring together Mexico's 1,600 town police forces under single state commands also failed.

The army, which had often been Calderón's go-to security solution, was equally ineffective. Wages were still low; morale, rock-bottom; and corruption, endemic. Desertions were common. "I think of my battalion, around half of us left, I was one of the last to go," confessed one soldier who had fled his post for the United States in 2014. "All we did it all went to the general." (It was a testament to the fear he still felt that he refused to name this general despite the threat of deportation.)

Furthermore, there were increasing reports of official atrocities that even Peña Nieto's upbeat press campaigns found difficult to hide. In June 2014, troops executed 22 civilians suspected of links to Micho-

acán traffickers in the village of Tlatlaya. In January 2015, federal police officers shot dead 16 unarmed protesters outside Apatzingán's city hall. And five months later, the federal police—backed by a helicopter gunship—shot dead over 40 suspected cartel members just outside the town of Ecuandureo, also in Michoacán. Though the police claimed it was a firefight, none of their colleagues died, and three-quarters of the dead gunmen had been shot in the head at point-blank range.

Most notoriously, on September 26, 2014, gunmen kidnapped and killed 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teaching training college in Guerrero. Initially, the government claimed that organized criminals in league with local officials had mistaken the students for cartel rivals and killed them. But doubts immediately arose. Despite dozens of arrests, official investigators were unable to find any of the students' remains. Subsequent investigators concluded that the federal police and the nearby army battalion had also been involved in the massacre. They speculated that the remains were most probably stashed in the army base.

Furthermore, though Peña Nieto was reluctant to play the strutting strongman, his government continued to pursue the policy of arresting or killing "high value" drug trafficking targets. Such an approach had a name. It was what the DEA dubbed the "kingpin" strategy and was designed to break up leadership structures and trafficking networks. Quite why Peña Nieto adopted such a strategy remains unclear. Was it the advice of his Colombian advisors who thought the tactic had functioned with Pablo Escobar in Medellín? Was it at the covert behest of the Americans? Or was it a throwback to the old 1970s barbarians-of-the-north tactic of cowing traffickers before forcing them into a deal on the PRU's terms.

Whatever the underlying reason, Peña Nieto's regime took down many of what they claimed to be Mexico's most important traffickers. In 2013, officials boasted that in just a year they had killed or captured 69 out of 122 cartel leaders, including the feared Zeta leader, Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, or Z-40. And in February 2014, Mexican marines, with DEA help, caught the Sinaloa trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán in a Mazatlán hotel.

The arrest, which seemed to cap off an impressive first fourteen months, actually proved to be a disaster. A year after his arrest, Guzmán fled from Mexico's leading high-security facility using a tunnel. It was clear that he had high-level help. The escape was not only utterly humiliating for the Peña Nieto regime, but also prevented his government from retreating from their kingpin policy even if it wanted to. Instead, intense U.S. pressure meant officials were forced to redouble their efforts.

In January 2016, Mexican police finally caught Guzmán, and a year later he was extradited to the United States. At the same time, now with the close cooperation of the United States, they continued to eliminate other “high value” targets. By the end of Peña Nieto's presidency, they had killed or captured 110 on the 122-man list.

Yet by 2018 it was clear that such an approach was completely ineffective. In fact, it was the very dilution of every bad drug war policy—big show; all blowback; no beneficial effects.

What it did do was what aggressive drug policing always did, but now on a countrywide scale. First, as U.S. and American agents put pressure on certain traffickers to sell out others, it split networks. Paranoia increased; bodyguards turned on capos and smugglers on wholesalers; informants or suspected informants were killed; and any residual trust disappeared. Even the bonds between the old Sinaloa families diminished, and Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada's family members turned on their old ally Guzmán.

Second, after leaders were captured, their lieutenants inevitably fought to control what remained. Front-page captures were almost inevitably followed by escalating murder rates. In the wake of Guzmán's 2016 arrest, Dámaso López Núñez, Guzmán's right-hand man, battled Guzmán's sons. In 2017, murders in Sinaloa increased by over a third.

Third, as established networks dissolved, organizations fractured. By the end of 2018, Mexicans confronted a bewildering landscape of cartel factions and criminal gangs. Quite how many, no one really knew. It depended on how you were counting. Incoming president

Andrés Manuel López Obrador recognized the existence of 37 cartels, a step up from the half dozen around in 2006. Crisis Group Mexico listed 463 criminal gangs and speculated that this was probably an underestimate.

These new gangs were small and isolated. They often had little contact with Colombian cocaine magnates, Asian pharmaceutical wholesalers, or cross-border smugglers. So, as Isela discovered, they kept their U.S.-bought guns; they kept the same cartel identities (what better way to instill fear than tap into the country's most fearsome subculture); and they turned to other forms of crime. These included extortion but also kidnapping, robbery, forced sex work, human trafficking, illegal logging, illegal mining, and the theft of gasoline.

Few Mexicans denounced these crimes to the police. (In a country where less than 1 percent of crimes were ever solved, they saw little point.) So statistics were endlessly debated. But some stood out. Survivors estimated that around a third of Mexican citizens suffered a crime in any given year. And around 70 percent felt insecure in their town or city. During any year around a third of victims were robbed but nearly a fifth experienced the kind of extortion that Isela and her family suffered. Kidnapping, in particular, is almost impossible to quantify; it is almost never reported. But in one particularly alarming report, the Mexican statistics office speculated that there might be as many as 100,000 kidnappings every year. Or to put it another way, one Mexican can get kidnapped every six minutes.

These depressingly everyday crimes were joined by a host of innovative practices. Stealing gasoline and tapping petrol lines became so popular that it even acquired shorthand slang. Criminals who engaged in the practice were dubbed *huachicoleros*, an old indigenous term for the runners of illegal alcohol stills, now repurposed for a new criminal age. There was even a patron saint of fuel thieves. El Santo Niño Huachicol, a Christ child holding a siphon and a jerry can, now shares Mexico's underworld pantheon with Jesús Malverde (the patron saint of drug traffickers), San Judas Tadeo (the patron saint of addicts), and the Santa Muerte.

Nowhere were such changes clearer than in the small, rather conservative state of Guanajuato just a couple of hundred miles northwest of Mexico City. Until recently, Guanajuato was known for its leather goods, its colonial architecture, and its petrol refineries. It has not been mentioned in this book before and with good reason. It has no real history of drug growing. (Though in the early twentieth century, weed aficionados did claim that the state produced Mexico's best marijuana.) It has no port to introduce precursors; it has no discernible chemicals industry; it has no entry point to the United States; and though it lies on a road from the drug-growing regions of Michoacán up to the Mexico-Texas border, there are plenty of other available routes to move heroin and meth.

Yet between 2013 and 2018, annual murders in Guanajuato increased by nearly 400 percent—from 700 to 3,412. It was the most of any Mexican state. Here at least half-a-dozen local gangs fought for control of a variety of criminal enterprises. In the big industrial city of León, conflicts centered on selling weed and crystal meth to the unemployed youths unable to find work in the declining leather goods factories. In mid-sized towns, like Guanajuato and Celaya, they focused on kidnapping and extortion. While around the big Salamanca oil refinery, groups struggled to monopolize the theft of petroleum.

Some of these gangs claimed broad national affiliation. The *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*—which both the Mexican and American authorities regularly described as Mexico's most powerful drug cartel—was involved. But so were much smaller local groups, including the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, a media-savvy group of bandits, kidnapers, and fuel thieves from around Celaya, or the Unión León, a gang of drug peddlers and petty criminals who worked the streets of León.

THESE NEW GROUPS with their new crimes pushed rates of violence even higher. In 2010, at the height of the Ciudad Juárez conflict, Mexico had registered 24,374 murders. In 2019 the country suffered over 36,000.

Yet if Peña Nieto's kingpin strategy fragmented trafficking organizations, it did nothing to stop the flow of narcotics heading north. Divide, perhaps; conquer, less so. As usual, the trade had a completely independent rhythm, connected to the fluctuations in U.S. tastes. So though some gangs fought, the economic incentives remained so powerful that trafficking groups frequently came together to organize transnational trades. And peasants often decided that the punishments for growing opium were less than the risks of poverty, hunger, or traveling and working in the United States.

Since 2012, the demands on the Mexican drug trade have changed radically. Cocaine use failed to recover after its dramatic fall in 2008. And the weed market disappeared almost completely. U.S. legalization of recreational marijuana, first passed in Washington and Colorado, extended to many states. Now in 2020 over two-thirds of Americans can smoke pot legally. A third can do so without a medical certificate. And they no longer have to rely on variable south-of-the-border dope. Instead, they can choose from an array of homegrown strains. (The weed trade, it should be noted, was one of the first industries to embrace Trump's call for America First.)

U.S. opiate use, however, grew. Experts now talked of not one but three interlinking epidemics, one of black-market prescription opioids like OxyContin, another of black tar heroin, and another one of the superstrong synthetic opioid fentanyl. As dealers often mixed all three, controlling doses was tough. This had catastrophic consequences. In 2017 over 70,000 Americans died from opiate overdoses. This was nearly double the total number of car crash victims. In fact, the numbers were so great that they even managed to shave a few months off the country's average life expectancy.

Yet the trade showed little sign of slowing. Since the 1960s, Mexican traffickers have learned to be flexible regarding the fickle tastes of their northern neighbors. So, as cocaine use bottomed out and marijuana demand dropped, traffickers increasingly concentrated on producing opium poppies. Most were still grown in the Golden Triangle and Guerrero, where peasants had been growing them for decades. But the

practice also spread throughout many of the poor mountain villages of southern Mexico.

It was there that I first came across their transformative power. I first visited the tiny village of San Pablo (not its real name) in 2007 while researching a book on indigenous religion. It stood on the border between the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. The first time I was there, what struck me was the silence. There were no cars, no tractors, and no hum of market commerce. Many of the men, I was told, had left to work in the fields of the San Quintín Valley in Baja California. There was an internet café, which doubled as the town's Western Union office; there was a small, tired, adobe church which, if you looked carefully, revealed that it still had some blocks from the old pre-Hispanic temple. Noise, when there was any, came from the morning calls of dozens of caged fighting cocks the local landowner had decided to locate next to what the villagers rather generously termed "the hotel." (It was actually two concrete cells with a shared outdoor bathroom.) Even religious festivities were quiet, somewhat sad affairs, populated by old couples, women, and bored-looking kids.

By contrast, when I returned in 2015, it was the noise that first hit me. The town square was flanked by a mass of 4-by-4s and flatbed trucks. It was evening and many flashed with neon underglow kits. Dozens of young men stood around; some revved their engines; others blasted out cumbia, narcocorrido, or reggaeton. The internet café was no more. But the whole village was a mess of rapid construction. There was a row of clothes shops, three new hotels, and what would have been called a "pop-up food market" in London but was in fact six taco stands, two juice stalls, and a hordog seller. Even the church had a freshly painted front, gold leaf details, and a pimped-out marble interior.

Shocked and somewhat concerned that I had arrived in the wrong village, I headed to see the priest. It was the same man I had met eight years ago. I gave him a copy of my book. He was visibly underwhelmed. "I don't know English and it's very long. Are there any pictures of the village?"—"Sorry, no." We made small talk and danced around what had transpired. Finally, he relented. "You want to know what has hap-

pened?" "Yes," I replied. He pointed up the hill behind the church. It was the same answer the British agronomist Paul Yates had received four decades earlier. "Poppies."

He shrugged and seemed unconcerned. "At least they know to treat the saint." He pointed to the flashy new church exterior. Visiting traffickers now paid farmers around \$1,000 for a kilo of opium. In a year—if they could stretch to two harvests—they could earn enough to pay for a car, a second story for their house, or a lavish, weeklong fiesta.

And San Pablo was not alone. Between 2009 and 2017, the hectares devoted to poppy growing more than doubled, increasing from 19,000 to 44,000 hectares. The Mexican military claimed that over 800—or a third—of the country's municipalities grew the drug. The crop provided 90 percent of the U.S. heroin market and earned rural producers \$1 billion a year. In all, it was worth nearly double the earnings from the country's wheat or cotton crops.

For Mexico's poorest, most remote villages, the U.S. opium crisis was a comparative boom time. It floated rural communities that were struggling because of the termination of farming subsidies enforced by NAFTA. And it meant that their men did not have to spend years north of the border away from their families. Poppy profits were remittances without the heartache.

Yet if Mexico's traffickers knew how to jump-start a rural drug boom, they also knew how to outlast one.

Around 2015 the demand for heroin started to decline. The United States had not suddenly decided to treat their addicts. The addicts had just got hooked on an alternative—fentanyl. Principally, it was a question of strength. Fentanyl is thirty to fifty times stronger than heroin. But it was also about supply. Chinese fentanyl manufacturers were starting to use the dark web to advertise the narcotic to American dealers. They would then ship the product across the United States cheaply and easily via the Postal Service, DHL, and FedEx. Drugs were meeting the digital economy. U.S. journalists had started to rename America's opium crisis the "fentanyl crisis."

Initially, this cut into Mexican profits. As Americans turned to fen-

tanyl, the street price of heroin fell. It dropped 10 percent in the last quarter of 2016 alone. By the following year, Mexican farmers were suffering similar shortfalls. Visiting buyers now offered them just above \$300 per kilo, a 70 percent drop from two years before.

But while village booms declined, Mexico's big traffickers just adapted. First, they started to import fentanyl directly from China, bringing in loads through the west coast ports of Manzanillo and Lázaro Cárdenas and then taking them over the border. But by 2017 they were also importing precursor chemicals, setting up labs, and producing their own versions of the drug. They also started to experiment. They mixed fentanyl with heroin and methamphetamine. They even started to manufacture carfentanil pills, which were 100 times more powerful than fentanyl and usually used on elephants.

Traffickers were not only sensitive to market demands; they were also wise to changes in antismuggling technology. When the U.S. authorities started to use massive X-ray imaging machines to monitor trucks as they crossed the border, the traffickers simply returned to the air and the sea. Some groups constructed massive catapults and flung packages of narcotics over the border to waiting gangs. Others purchased drones, attached small bags of fentanyl, and flew them north. Others started to invest in GPS-directed submersibles and move drugs through the Caribbean.

In fact, Mexican traffickers were so quick to recognize changing demands and shifting technologies that wholesale drug prices in the United States actually dropped over the past decade. This is despite the billions of dollars both governments have spent on police, border guards, guns, armored trucks, and other security paraphernalia. A kilo of heroin that was \$73,000 in 2007 was worth just over \$50,000 in 2015. A kilo of cocaine dropped around 10 percent in the same period.

If the war on drugs was ever really about pricing out addicts and reducing addiction, it was a dramatic and costly failure.

It is something that the new president has—it seems—recognized. Andrés Manuel López Obrador has also avoided any inflammatory martial rhetoric. (During his campaign, he paraded the slogan “*ábraz-*

zos, no balazos, or “hugs, not bullets.”) He has also avoided the counterproductive kingpin strategy. In October 2019, he did this quite explicitly, ordering military units to stand down rather than capture El Chapo Guzmán’s son and risk another round of intracartel fighting. He has attempted to refocus concern on U.S. arms smuggling and push money toward social projects in some of Mexico’s most deprived areas. And he has reduced the army’s rural eradication campaigns.

Yet some problems have not gone away. In 2018, López Obrador ran on a promise to send the soldiers back to the barracks. He was going to end the militarization of the drug war. But the army remains a key public security force. And the new 90,000-strong National Guard—though nominally under civilian control—actually comprises an uneasy blend of former soldiers, former navy personnel, and former members of the notoriously corrupt federal police. Similar accusations of kidnapping, torture, and extrajudicial murder leveled at the security forces during Calderón’s and Peña Nieto’s regimes have dogged both institutions.

Furthermore, U.S. pressure on Mexican drug policy remains. When Trump was in power, López Obrador managed to evade disapproval by agreeing to American demands to round up and detain Central American migrants. Trump was happy; the drug hawks were quiet. And when the DEA pushed a more aggressive line, arresting the former head of the army General Salvador Cienfuegos in October 2020, the Mexican president pushed back. He threatened to kick the DEA out of Mexico. The Americans capitulated and released Cienfuegos.

But more intense U.S. pressure may return. Without the ability to use Central Americans as bargaining chips, will López Obrador be able to guide Biden the same way he has guided Trump? Will the DEA seek revenge for its humiliation over Cienfuegos?

Such matters of realpolitik may shape future U.S.-Mexican relations; they may even decide the fate of the next few kingspins the Americans choose to demonize and the Mexicans decide to give up. But they provide little comfort to Isela and others like her. The war on drugs has already turned her once-quiet-suburban barrio of Acapulco into

a no-go zone. El Chino and La Maña have taken over her shop. And if she returns, El Chino and La Maña have vowed to kill her and her surviving family. They remain in Oakland, awaiting the immigration court's decision.

Such realpolitik will also do nothing to the trade itself. As long as narcotics remain illegal, incentives to produce and smuggle them will outweigh any economic alternatives. A handful of authorities on both sides of the border will always take a bribe. And whether the Americans choose to focus on the air, the Eastern Seaboard, or the desert frontier, traffickers will always find a way through. A century and counting; the Mexican drug trade shows no sign of slowing.