

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1705
November 16, 2007

The U.S. and Mexico: Taking the “Mérida Initiative” Against Narco-Terror

Ray Walser, Ph.D., and James M. Roberts

Mexican President Felipe Calderón is locked in a valiant fight against narco-traffickers, proving his commitment by extraditing to U.S. courts and prisons powerful Mexican drug kingpins and politicians, as well as seizing large amounts of drugs and drug cash. He and President Bush recently announced the \$1.4 billion “Mérida Initiative,” a joint U.S.–Mexico program to further the fight. The plan has many anti-corruption safeguards and “end-use monitoring” provisions. It provides aircraft, equipment, software, and training that is badly needed by military, judicial, and law enforcement officials in Mexico. The initiative will improve the effectiveness of both governments in the battle against drug traffickers along the U.S.–Mexican border.

At Last, U.S. Has a Full Mexican Partner. Since taking office in December 2006, President Calderón has bravely taken on well-funded narco-traffickers who had before been operating with impunity. His country has faced mounting mayhem by the ruthless and heavily-armed gangs and growing domestic drug use. So far, Mexico has seen more than 2,000 drug-related homicides in 2007, including 250 police officers.

In a series of breakthrough decisions unprecedented in the history of U.S.–Mexico relations, Calderón has demonstrated his commitment to being a sincere partner in the joint fight against a foe as formidable as global terrorists. His government has extradited to the United States powerful Mexican drug kingpins, including Francisco Javier Arellano-Felix,¹ and will soon extradite a former governor of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo con-

victed of drug trafficking.² He has dispatched more than 40,000 soldiers into 10 Mexican states to support the out-gunned police. So far in 2007, Mexican authorities have seized more than 40 tons of cocaine. With a street value of more than \$400 million, it represents about 25 percent of all drug seizures worldwide this year. Mexico has also “initiated unprecedented controls in the supply of pseudo ephedrine [crystal meth].”³

These moves have shown results: Supplies of cocaine and crystal meth in the United States have dropped, and prices have gone up. Calderón has also shown guts in seizing drug money; more than \$200 million in cash was confiscated from a Mexico City basement last summer.⁴

Unlike his 2006 election opponent, leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador (whom he narrowly defeated), Calderón is committed to democracy and to continued prosperity in a globalizing, modern Mexico. His margin of victory came from the growing Mexican middle class, which has benefited from modernization. The Mexican people are sick of drug lords and corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. The message to Calderón was clear: Work with the Americans and solve this problem once and for all. In Felipe Calderón, Mexican voters have a presi-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Crime/wm1705.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

dent—serious, purposeful, and businesslike—who accepts full responsibility for problems in his country without resorting to demagogic diatribes against the United States. President Bush has responded in kind, acknowledging U.S. responsibility for reducing demand for illicit drugs and stopping the flow of weapons and drug cash from the United States to Mexico.

Bipartisan Support in the U.S. Congress. This week, both the House and Senate will hold hearings on the Bush Administration's request for \$1.4 billion over the next three years to fund the Mérida Initiative. It commands considerable bipartisan support, especially from House members of both parties that represent districts along the border. Some in Congress grumbled about a lack of advanced consultations prior to announcement of the program; the Bush Administration responds that it did not want to send preliminary details to Congress before final agreement with Mexico.

Skeptics and fatalists are already balking and can be expected to cite past failures. However, the mid-1990s Clinton Administration effort to equip Mexico to fight the drug war was poorly thought out, and the Vietnam-era Army surplus that was sent to Mexico (with no accompanying training and maintenance) was eventually returned to the United States.

Not a “Plan Mexico.” The Mérida Initiative's bland name was chosen to avoid comparisons with “Plan Colombia” and to deny Calderón's opponents—such as López Obrador and other Hugo Chávez sympathizers—the chance to assert that the United States is attempting to diminish Mexico's sovereignty.

While Plan Colombia has not reduced production of cocaine as much as envisioned, it has been instrumental in stabilizing that country. Chavistas and leftists in Colombia have criticized their government for permitting U.S. military operations in Colombia. No such operations are foreseen under the Merida Initiative. Mexico faces no serious insurgency. It controls its national territory and has considerable capability to respond to security threats. Merida is the capital of Yucatan, a major transit point for drugs going through Mexico to the United States. Roughly 90 percent of all cocaine consumed in the United States transits through Mexico.⁵

Begin with Good Equipment, Software, and Training. The Initiative starts with \$550 million in the fiscal year 2008 war supplemental appropriations bill. Mexico would receive \$500 million, mostly for eight Bell transport helicopters and two surveillance aircraft similar to those used by the U.S. Coast Guard. Training and maintenance would be included, and the agreement allows “end-use-monitoring” by the United States to prevent misuse of these assets (again, an unprecedented concession from a Mexican government). Other big-ticket items include ion scanners, night vision goggles, and non-intrusive inspection equipment.

The agreement places considerable emphasis on data management, software programs, and secure communications for processing of drug intelligence. The package also provides training for forensics, polygraph testing, and human rights training. These provisions would help Mexico tighten internal security, guard against corruption, and modernize law enforcement practices.⁶

1. U.S. Department of Justice, “Former Leader of Arellano-Felix Drug Trafficking Organization Sentenced to Life in Prison,” (press release), November 5, 2007, at www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2007/November/07_crm_886.html (November 13, 2007).
2. James C. McKinley, Jr., “Mexico Moves to Send Ex-Governor to U.S. on Drug Charges,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2007, at www.nytimes.com/2007/06/22/world/americas/22mexico.html?_r=1&oref=slogin (November 13, 2007).
3. U.S. Department of Justice, New Data Show Significant Disruptions in U.S. Methamphetamine, Cocaine Markets Price of Meth Soars 73 Percent; Purity Down by Nearly a Third,” (press release), November 8, 2007, at www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr110807.html (November 13, 2007).
4. Laurence Iliff, “Calderon: Drug Battle Is Working: In His First State of the Union, President Says Fight Only Beginning,” *The Dallas Morning News* (Texas), September 3, 2007.
5. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2007: Mexico,” March 2007, www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80855.htm (November 13, 2007).
6. Manuel Roig-Franzia, “Document Details U.S. Aid Proposed for Mexico: Aircraft a Major Focus of Anti-Drug Package,” *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2007, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/26/AR2007102602289.html.

Also included is \$50 million for countries in the Central American Free Trade Agreement to fight against the violent gangs and drug-traffickers that threaten the very life blood of, and undercut security and progress among, America's trading partners.

A Win for Calderón is a Win for the U.S. and a Setback for Chávez. The United States has a major stake in the success of the Calderón Administration. With \$1.1 billion in daily bilateral trade,⁷ Mexico is the United States' second largest trading partner and its fourth-largest oil supplier.⁸ The total value of U.S. investment in Mexico exceeds \$66 billion.⁹ Turning a cold shoulder on the counter-narcotics issue would send the wrong signal to the new administration and the Mexican people.

López Obrador and Hugo Chávez would love to see the Merida Initiative defeated. They know that drug cartels and illicit drugs undermine stability in Mexico and weaken the United States. U.S. policy-makers should expect opposition from the far left, including moveon.org, Chavista types, and Soros-funded supporters of drug legalization.

The Mérida Initiative is no panacea. There will be no lightning victory; drug cartels will fight back with characteristic ruthlessness; certain areas of cooperation will be thorny. The battle is on Mexico's turf; no U.S. drug enforcement agents or military boots should be on the ground. To guard against corruption and abuse, adequate benchmarks and safeguards for transparency and accountability must be included.

Furthermore, passage of the initiative will not resolve other complex bi-national issues, which range from immigration and border control to water rights and protection of the environment. However, the initiative can improve the climate for ongoing discussions.

The drug war is as real as any war elsewhere in the world. People are being killed daily, U.S. national security is threatened, the spill-over effects degrade border security, and both governments are damaged by the corrupting influences of drug money. Mexico will be safer for these measures, and so will the United States.

Conclusion. The administrations of Mexican President Felipe Calderón and U.S. President George W. Bush should push forward—as equal partners—with their unprecedented and outstanding level of cooperation in the war against narco-terrorists along the U.S.–Mexican border. The current proposal presents a genuine window of opportunity to expand this partnership. The legislative branches of both the Mexican and U.S. governments should provide the resources needed to launch the Merida Initiative.

Ray Walser, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies and James M. Roberts is Research Fellow for Economic Freedom and Growth in the Center for International Trade and Economics at The Heritage Foundation.

7. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *U.S. International Transactions Data for Mexico*, September 14, 2007, at www.bea.gov/international/bp_web/simple.cfm?anon=71&table_id=10&area_id=22 (November 14, 2007).
8. American Petroleum Institute, "Estimated Crude and Products Imports to the U.S. from Leading Supplier Countries" (Source: DOE, *Petroleum Supply Monthly*, October 2007), November 14, 2007, at www.api.org/statistics/upload/Statimports1114.pdf (November 14, 2007).
9. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad, F Investment Tables," December 12, 2005, at www.bea.gov/scb/pdf/2005/12December/D-pages/1205DpgFpdf (November 14, 2007).