

The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs

Taking the War on Drugs Down South: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Mexico (1973-1980) --Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	This article offers a systematic and comprehensive account of the activities and policies of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Mexico between 1973, the year in which the agency was founded, and 1980, the year until which most of documents related to the DEA's presence in Mexico are declassified. The paper draws on primary sources found in various archives in Mexico and the United States, including many recently declassified cables, letters, intelligence reports, and internal memorandums produced by DEA officials.
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November 24th, 2019

Response to reviewers

I want to thank both reviewers for the very insightful comments. As it will be explained in the following paragraphs, I addressed almost all suggestions and comments in the new draft.

Reviewer 1

1. As suggested by reviewer 1, the introduction was completely revised. While the objective of the narration of the murder of Camarena was to engage the reader by using a well-known episode of the presence of the DEA in Mexico, I agree with him that that the introduction of the paper (the murder of agent Camarena) was somehow superfluous.
2. As suggested by reviewer 1, I emphasized the process of imbalanced and asymmetry between a developed country and a developing country. I did it so in the new introduction and, more concretely, in p.6 and p.7 where I included a brief discussion on the tensions between Mexican and U.S. officials.
3. Unlike what the reviewer states, the article doesn't aim to address those literatures that overstate US influence on policing and security in other countries. While I agree that extrapolating the findings to countries as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan (where the US was highly active in counter narcotics and in the structuring of policing and security apparatus) would have been interesting, the objectives of this article go well beyond that point.
4. As stated by reviewer 1, the article misses the Nixon administration's decision in launching of the drug war and the changes in institutional counter narcotics responsibilities in the US. However, I do believe that this point doesn't relate directly with the subject of study.

Reviewer 2

1. Typos were corrected.
2. As stated by reviewer 2, the article doesn't address with FBN's engagement in Mexico. The primary reason for this is that I just published an entire article on the FBN's engagement in Mexico that includes some analysis on the attitude and bureaucratic survival instincts of Harry Anslinger. The article was just published some weeks ago. For this new version, I added a reference of the aforementioned article in the introduction.
3. UNFDAC was indeed very much a product of US diplomatic endeavour. I added the suggested reference (Bruun Pan, *The Gentlemen's Club*, 1975).
4. Figures 1 & 2 are now better linked to the text.
5. I completely agree on the comment related to the "highly successful" nature of CENTAC operations. Indeed, the first draft didn't include a discussion of the problems of measuring success by counting seizures or arrests. A critical comment was added in p.20.



6. As suggested by reviewer 2, I added some contextualization on the Carter administration position on human rights (p.14). However, rather than focusing my attention in Carter's position on human rights, I highlighted the differences between his position and the DEA's drug policy approach.
7. As suggested by reviewer 2, I added a map of Mexico.

Other significant changes

1. Part of the "old" introduction was used for the conclusion.
2. I included a brief discussion on the issue of the use of the herbicide paraquat in the eradication campaigns (p.14).
3. For the "human rights concern" section (p.20 and 21) I expanded on a survey that documented 18 forms of torture practiced by Mexican narcotic officials.
4. The structure of some phrases was changed. Two paragraphs changed positions in the text.
5. Minor grammatical corrections were made.

Again, I want to thank both reviewers for the very insightful comments to my text.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Perez Ricart'.

Dr. Carlos A. Pérez Ricart
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Taking the *War on Drugs* Down South: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Mexico (1973-1980)

This article offers a systematic and comprehensive account of the activities and policies of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Mexico between 1973, the year in which the agency was founded, and 1980, the year until which most of documents related to the DEA's presence in Mexico are declassified. The paper draws on primary sources found in various archives in Mexico and the United States, including many recently declassified cables, letters, intelligence reports, and internal memorandums produced by DEA officials.

The first research objective of this paper is to examine the extent of the DEA's operational leeway in Mexico. This paper's working hypothesis is that the DEA's operations in the country were heavily limited by both U.S. foreign policy and Mexican internal political dynamics. On the one hand, the DEA had to struggle with a wide network of U.S. actors and organizations involved in drug policy — including the State Department, the CIA, the Customs Service and the White House— on the other hand, Mexican concerns about national sovereignty restricted the operating margin of the DEA. These two constraints gave rise to a fragmented U.S. drug policy in which no single actor was ever able to impose themselves fully, let alone develop an articulate drug policy for Mexico.

The second objective of the article is to examine the role of the DEA in the way drug enforcement operations were planned and executed by Mexican authorities during this period, and aims to advance the argument that, although the DEA did shape the way in which local, state, and federal authorities approached anti-narcotics operations during the period, the Mexican drug enforcement policy was not solely the consequence of the imposition of the U.S. government. By examining the power of Mexican actors to execute and design drug policy, the article problematizes the common assumption that U.S. institutions have unlimited power to transfer and impose law enforcement approaches on the rest of the world.

The paper aims to contribute to three different blocks of literature: first, the examination of the activities of U.S. drug enforcement agents overseas, and the reactions of foreign governments to the presence of these agents within their borders; second, the study of the history of U.S.-Mexico transgovernmental relations; third, the study of Mexican drug policy during a period that remains understudied in the bibliography.

The newly emerging literature on the activities of U.S. law enforcement agents overseas, and the reactions of the host countries to these agents draws on an interdisciplinary perspective that combines debates in comparative law, policing, and criminal justice. One of the main objectives of this area of scholarship is the examination of U.S. law enforcement agents' impact on how specific policing techniques were executed in other countries.¹ While scholarship on the activities of U.S. Treasury

¹ Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (University of California Press, 2019); Marc Becker, *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, and the Making of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Matthew R. Pembleton, *Containing Addiction: The Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the Origins of America's Global* (University

Department agents in Europe and Asia has been undertaken by both historians and political scientists in the last decade or so, regrettably, the historical examination of U.S. drug enforcement agents working in Latin America has been addressed by only a few publications.² While Celia Toro published two important pieces more than 30 years ago, exploring how and why the DEA became a powerful presence in Mexico, and how DEA agents have become a challenge for the Mexican State, the scholarship remains scant.³

While the article engages mainly with the activities of DEA agents in Mexico, the text also offers significant insights around the unintended consequences of police training programs sponsored by the DEA. In doing that, the article contributes to the broader bibliography interested in examining the intersection between human rights and drug policy.⁴ The existing literature suggests that, while the United States did indeed help to modernize intelligence-gathering and policing operations, the programs also helped “to militarize the police and fostered, through rigorous ideological conditioning, the dehumanization of political adversaries and a sense of suspicion toward grassroots mobilization”.⁵ This article examines this proposition, and assess the extent to which the DEA promoted human rights violations perpetrated by the Mexican Military and the Mexican Federal Judicial Police (MFJP) during the counternarcotic efforts that took place between 1973 and 1980.

Regarding the study of the history of U.S.-Mexico transgovernmental relations, this article moves towards a research agenda that recognizes not only the fractures and continuities that have permeated the bilateral relationship but also the role of specific actors in this dynamic.⁶ The methodological decision of focusing on one single entity (the DEA) allows us to distinguish it from the numerous other actors involved in shaping U.S.-Mexico relations. In this sense, this article will maintain that the DEA operated as a transnational political actor whose objectives, methods and practices were not always aligned with the priorities and general political guidelines of the U.S. State Department.⁷

of Minnesota Press, 2017); Jonathan Marshall, “Cooking the Books: The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the China Lobby and Cold War Propaganda, 1950-1962,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 31, no. 1 (2013); Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, “The Role of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in Mexican Drug Policy Design (1940-1968),” *Frontera Norte* 31, no. 1 (2019): 1–22.

² Ethan Nadelmann, “The DEA in Latin America: Dealing with Institutionalized Corruption,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 29, no. 4 (1987): 1–39; Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, “The Role of the DEA in the Emergence of the Field of Anti-Narcotics Policing in Latin America,” *Global Governance* 24, no. 2 (2018): 171–93.

³ María Celia Toro, *Mexico’s “War” on Drugs: Causes and Consequences* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995); María Celia Toro, “The Internationalization of Police: The DEA in Mexico,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (1999): 623–40.

⁴ Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Martha K. Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*; Becker, *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files*.

⁵ Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression*, 2.

⁶ An example of this are: Deborah Kang, *The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *¡La Migra! Una Historia de La Patrulla Fronteriza de Estados Unidos* (D.F. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015).

⁷ For this argument: Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, “U.S. Pressure and Mexican Anti-Drugs Efforts from 1940 to 1980: Importing the War on Drugs?,” in *Beyond the Drug War in Mexico: Human Rights*,

Lastly, the paper will also contribute to the literature on the history of Mexican drug policy. While in recent years scholars have begun to examine the *foundations* of the so-called war on drugs in Mexico,⁸ we still know very little about the policies, discourses and practices that permeated the Mexican State's approach to the trafficking of drugs. This is particularly true for the period between the launch of Operation Intercept in 1969—the Nixon administration's decision to partially close the border with Mexico—and the murder of DEA agent Enrique Camarena in 1985.

The article is divided in three main parts. The first section presents a summary of the presence of U.S. law enforcement agencies in Mexico prior to the foundation of the DEA, and an overview of the structure of the DEA in Mexico between 1973 and 1980. Section two and three examine DEA operations in two theoretically distinct but practically intertwined antidrug approaches: the suppression of poppy cultivation via eradication campaigns, and the policing of drug trade via undercover operations, prosecution of drug traffickers, and interdiction activities. The last part of section three includes an examination of the concerns raised by journalists and activist who claimed that the DEA was fostering, or at least not hindering, human right violations in rural Mexico. Finally, a conclusion is presented.

1. The DEA in Mexico: a review

U.S. authorities' concern about illegal drugs coming into the U.S. via Mexico can be traced to the early twentieth century when U.S. consular officials started collecting information on the sowing and trafficking of opium. In the 1930's U.S. Treasury agents began to cross the border not only to verify this information, but also to investigate the characteristics of this trade in more depth. These investigations had to be discrete and tended to be moderate. Most of the investigations remained limited to border cities, lasting for no more than a few weeks. Federal Bureau of Narcotic (FBN) agents, many of whom entered the DEA in 1973, had to be particularly careful, as their activities in Mexico were prohibited by upper echelons of the U.S. Treasury Department, and where viewed with suspicion by the Mexican government.⁹ In addition to their policing activities, U.S. agents participated in eradication campaigns that took place annually in Mexico's Northwest from 1938, not only accompanying the campaigns but *supervising* them.¹⁰ By the early nineteen forties, FBN and Customs agents were even participating, in cooperation with the Mexican police, in high-profile actions against criminal drug networks in Mexico.

the Public Sphere and Justice, ed. Wil G. Pansters, Benjamin T. Smith, and Peter Watt (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 33–52.

⁸ Aileen Teague, "Mexico's Dirty War on Drugs: Source Control and Dissidence in Drug Enforcement," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 33, no. 1 (2019): 63–87; Aileen Teague, "The United States, Mexico, and the Mutual Securitization of Drug Enforcement, 1969–1985," *Diplomatic History* 43, no. 5 (2019): 785–812; Benjamin T. Smith and Wil G. Pansters, "US Moral Panics, Mexican Politics, and the Borderlands Origins of the War on Drugs, 1950–62," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2018, 1–24; Froylán Enciso, "Los Fracasos Del Chantaje: Régimen de Prohibición de Drogas y Narcotráfico," in *Seguridad Nacional y Seguridad Internacional: Los Grandes Problemas de México*, ed. Mónica Serrano and Arturo Alvarado, vol. XV (D.F. México: El Colegio de México, 2010), 62–104.

⁹ The US Customs was the agency that enjoyed jurisdiction over narcotic crimes in Mexico, Latin America and Europe. The rest of the world "belonged" to the FBN. While this arrangement was the result of bureaucratic struggles inside the Treasury Department, compliance was always difficult to enforce and FBN agents did cross the border numerous times to undertake undercover operations.

¹⁰ Pérez Ricart, "The Role of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in Mexican Drug Policy Design (1940-1968)."

Starting in the 1940s, the Treasury Department maintained a formal representative in Mexico City charged with policing the narcotics trade. Due to the reduction of Mexican opium on the U.S. market during the 1950s, the attention of the FBN and the Customs Bureau shifted to heroin coming from the Near East, and only few narcotic operations took place in Mexico during this decade. However, the appearance of a new class of international heroin and cocaine traffickers in the late fifties *forced* U.S. law enforcement agents to move beyond the border area to stage their operations.¹¹ Agents of the FBN again were operating in Mexico regularly, and undertook several counternarcotic operations that attracted the attention of other state institutions and the press on both sides of the border. By 1961 the situation had become intolerable for the Mexican government, leading to the U.S. and Mexico agreeing on a set of unofficial guidelines, albeit not necessarily respecting them at all times.¹²

In 1963 the FBN inaugurated a branch office in Mexico City with authority over Mexico, Central and South America. Two agents were assigned to the new office, and a second office was established in Monterrey months later. The FBN's representative in Mexico assumed administrative and investigative responsibilities, as well as overseeing the daily management of *Narcotic Control Project Mexico*, the first U.S. package of narcotic assistance to Mexico, which allowed for almost \$500,000 to be invested in helicopters, light weapons and grenade launchers.¹³

After numerous scandals and evidence of corruption, the FBN was dissolved in 1968, which led to the creation of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) and the consolidation of drug law enforcement in the Department of Justice. Only five years later, the BNDD was reorganized. Effective July 1, 1973, BNDD infrastructure and functions were transferred to the newly formed DEA. Since then, the DEA has been the most important law enforcement agency in the area of counternarcotics worldwide.¹⁴

The structure of the agency in Mexico

With slight modifications, the organizational structure of the DEA remained the same between 1973 and 1980. It was composed of a Regional Director, an Assistant Regional Director, a Regional Intelligence Unit Supervisor, a few Regional Agents in Charge (RAC), also called Special Agent's in Charge (SAIC), responsible for the running of the DEA's branches around the country, and an always malleable number of Special Agents (SAs). In addition, some administrative staff, mostly women, were attached to each office (See, Figure 1 and 2). The DEA's main office in Mexico City was responsible for coordinating the entire counternarcotics law enforcement effort in Mexico and Central America, while smaller branches were located in strategically chosen cities such as Monterrey, Guadalajara, Hermosillo and Mazatlán.

¹¹ On the emergence of a new generation of traffickers: Paul Gootenberg, "The 'Pre-Colombian' Era of Drug Trafficking in the Americas: Cocaine, 1945-1965," *The Americas* 64, no. 2 (2007): 133–76.

¹² Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, "Policing the Drug Trade: U.S. Narcotic Agents in Mexico (1936-1963)," forthcoming.

¹³ Charles Siragusa to William J. Durkin, 'AID 523-W-71-AE Narcotics Control Project Mexico', 7 February 1963, RG 170, Caja 160, folder 3, NARA

¹⁴ Andreas and Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations*.

A GAO report stated that as of January 3, 1974 the DEA's regional office in Mexico was staffed with 16 agents, including the regional and deputy regional directors.¹⁵ A second GAO report stated that as of August 31 of 1974, the DEA's regional office in Mexico was staffed with 21 agents, one of them stationed in Costa Rica. In addition, the report gives an account of 157 agents stationed at the U.S. border and the existence of 54 agents "working Mexican drug cases" in "special task forces"¹⁶ as well as the DEA's plans to assign 16 more agents to the Mexico City regional office by December 1974.¹⁷ In a Congressional Hearing on June 29, 1976, Peter B. Bensinger, the DEA's administrator, admitted the existence of 25 agents assigned to Mexico,¹⁸ and as of March 1978, the State Department authorized 33 agent positions and 25 support positions for the DEA in Mexico, adding up to a total staff of 58.¹⁹ Around nine of these agents were part of the DEA's Regional Intelligence Unit (RIU), a specific body in charge of processing and sharing intelligence information.

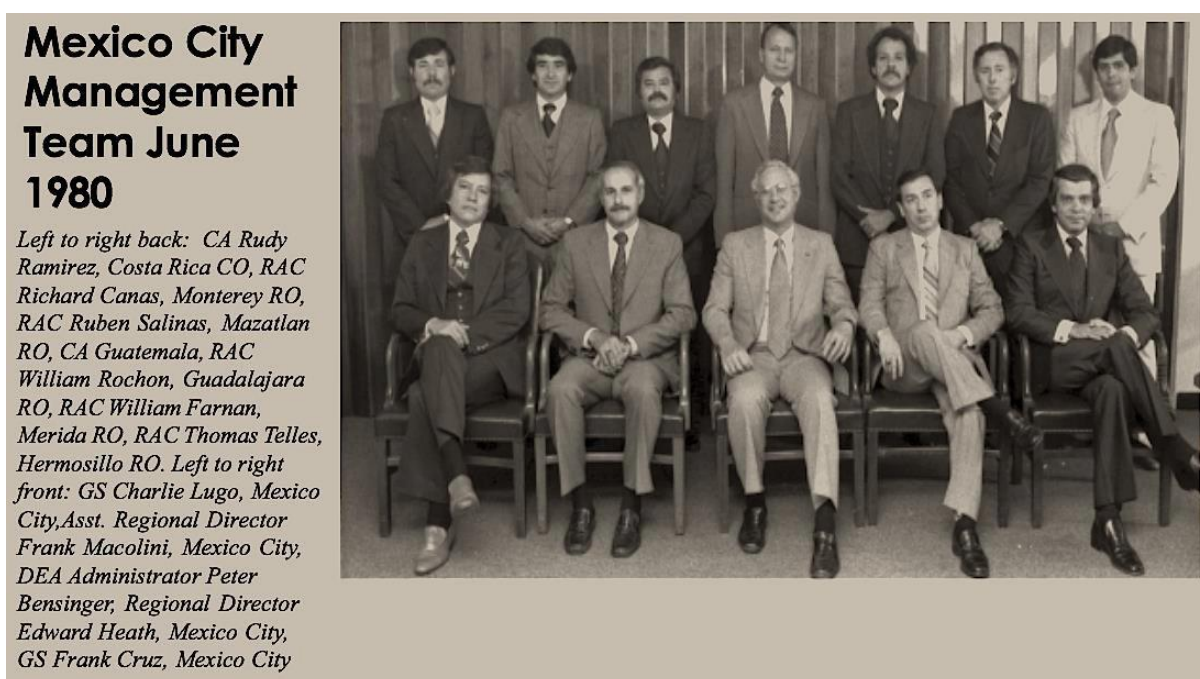


Figure 1: Mexico City Management Team, June 1980. Source: Drug Enforcement Administration: A Tradition of Excellence 1973-2003, DEA, p. 42.

¹⁵ United States General Accounting Office, "Identifying and Eliminating Sources of Dangerous Drugs: Efforts Being Made, But Not Enough" (Washington D.C.: GAO, 1974).

¹⁶ United States General Accounting Office, "Efforts to Stop Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Coming from and through Mexico and Central America" (Washington D.C.: GAO, 1974), 2-3.

¹⁷ United States General Accounting Office, 3.

¹⁸ Committee on International Relations. House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, "U.S. Citizens Imprisoned in Mexico Part II (Hearings Published)," 1976, 19, HRG-1975-HIR-0035, Congressional Publications.

¹⁹ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department, "Press Guidance on Withdrawal of DEA from GOM Eradication Program [Limited Official Use]," March 16, 1978, 1978MEXICO04410, WikiLeaks PlusD, Carter Cables.



Figure 2. DEA’s administrative staff in Mexico City by 1979. Source: DEA World, april 1979, vol. 4, p.3.

The work of the DEA in Mexico was supported by some 20 to 35 DEA temporary duty (TDY) personnel. These were mostly agents attached to domestic offices hired to participate in the eradication campaigns that took place between the fall of 1975 and early 1978.²⁰ They travelled to Mexico twice a year and stayed for periods of ninety days before going back to their offices in the U.S. Their participation in Mexico was paid for by the U.S. International Narcotics Control Program. While some participated in interdiction activities, the main function was to accompany MFJP officers in reconnaissance and destruction verification missions of poppy and marijuana fields.

While DEA agents attached to domestic offices along the border used to travel to Mexico without authorization, and sometimes without clearance from the Regional Office in Mexico City, DEA agents established in Mexico had to be authorized by both the U.S. State Department and the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs

The Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs accepted the permanent presence of DEA agents as liaison partners of the Mexican Attorney General but was more reluctant to accept the legal authority of the agency in enforcing U.S. laws in Mexico. Every time a new Regional Director arrived in Mexico City, the Mexican Attorney General organized a meeting to explain the “the rules of the game” of cooperative anti-drug efforts, and the “political sensibilities” of the Mexican public.²¹ Naturally, this did not prevent tensions between DEA agents and Mexican officials. For the period of analysis Mexican officials complained systematically about DEA agents’ “insolent and inept behavior,” and for acting against the will and “behind the back” of Mexican narcotic officials.²² On one occasion, the Mexican government even threatened those officials with expulsions.²³ Notably, most of the criticism was restricted to private

²⁰ Committee on the Judiciary. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published)” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 116, HRG-1978-SJS-0066, Congressional Publications.

²¹ See, for example: Robert H. McBride to U.S. State Department, “Narcotics Control [Confidential],” June 26, 1973, MD00165, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

²² Marlise Simons, “The U.S.-Mexico Drug War Feud: Drug War Feud Seen in Mexico,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1976.

²³ Simons.

circles, and was not expressed publicly. However, occasional leaks to the media revealed the complex and difficult relationship between Mexican and U.S. officers.

As in other countries, DEA agents in Mexico had to receive clearance from the State Department, and like all other official U.S. personnel abroad, all DEA agents in Mexico were under the full authority of the Ambassador. However, day to day operations were in the chain of command of the DEA's Regional Director. As will be shown later in this text, struggles between the State Department personnel at the Embassy and DEA's personnel were constant and had the unintended consequence of developing a fragmented foreign policy with a lack of internal coherency.

Despite the aforementioned restrictions, DEA agents in Mexico operated on two main tasks: the promotion, supervision and evaluation of the eradication campaigns of opium and marijuana crops, and investigations aimed at disrupting drug networks. The next section will explore how opium poppy eradication became a priority for the DEA in the mid-1970's, and how the DEA played a key role in shaping the planning and execution of a program that ended up being "the largest, most sophisticated and most successful enterprise of its kind in history."²⁴

2. The politics of eradication

As stated above, manual efforts to eradicate opium and marijuana crops had existed in Mexico since the late 1930's, when teams of state and federal police officers, along with military forces, were sent to the mountains of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua every year, in order to destroy opium poppy or marijuana plants. The intensity of those campaigns varied throughout the decades, depending on the severity of U.S. pressures, and the interest of different Mexican governments in investing resources in such endeavors.²⁵

Eradication efforts gained momentum after the closure of the Mexican border by the U.S. in 1969, in what was known as Operation Intercept, a way of exercising pressure to force Mexico to combat the trafficking of drugs. As a result of Operation Intercept, the Mexican government reached an agreement with the U.S. to double its eradication efforts with material assistance from the U.S.²⁶ An initial grant of \$1 million resulted in the delivery of three light fixed-wing aircraft and five 5-seat helicopters between March 1970 and August 1971.²⁷ From that point onwards, several "letters of agreement" provided for the purchase of troop-carrying helicopters, portable radios, mobile radio base stations, maintenance and spare part packages, and pilots and mechanics training.²⁸

Opium poppy eradication became a priority for the DEA when the Mexican share of the U.S. heroin supply increased. In 1971, the DEA estimated that only about 2 percent of the U.S. heroin supply

²⁴ Richard B. Craig, "Human Rights and Mexico's Antidrug Campaign," *Social Science Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1980): 700.

²⁵ Pérez Ricart, "U.S. Pressure and Mexican Anti-Drugs Efforts from 1940 to 1980: Importing the War on Drugs?"

²⁶ Mexico-United States Joint Working Group, "Narcotics, Marihuana & Dangerous Drugs," December 12, 1969, MD00092, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

²⁷ United States General Accounting Office, "Efforts to Stop Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Coming from and through Mexico and Central America," 26.

²⁸ United States General Accounting Office, 26.

was produced in Mexico.²⁹ As a result of operations against the French Connection (a drug trafficking network that exported heroin to the U.S. from Turkey), and a U.S. agreement with Turkey to ban opium poppy cultivation there, the share of the U.S. heroin market supplied by Mexico increased dramatically. By 1974, according to the DEA, 90 percent of the heroin consumed in the United States was of Mexican origin.³⁰ As a result, starting in 1973, more political pressure was placed on Mexico to remedy the situation.³¹

In January 1974, a joint task force composed of both DEA and MFJP officials was created to “evaluate enforcement capabilities in eradication, interdiction, and intelligence analysis.” The DEA entitled this operation Special Enforcement Activity in Mexico (SEAM).³² In addition to SEAM, and in cooperation with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the DEA developed a system that allowed remote sensing devices to photograph and pinpoint areas of opium poppy and marijuana cultivation. This technology allowed recording multiple images simultaneously with specially selected filters, and thus was especially useful for revealing the presence of opium poppy fields that were “invisible to the naked eye.”³³ This technological innovation, which required the training of Mexican personnel, was presented to the Mexican Attorney General by the DEA as early as 1973, and was first used in the 1975 eradication campaign as a pilot program.³⁴ In order to accept the introduction of the system, the Mexican Attorney General requested new aircraft, radio equipment, pilot and mechanic training, arms and ammunition, and an array of other equipment in exchange.³⁵

The main achievement of the DEA, however, came some months later. On November 13, 1975 following a cycle of meetings with high-ranking U.S. government officials throughout the previous summer, the Mexican Attorney General, Pedro Ojeda Paullada, announced that herbicides would be employed against opium poppy and marijuana plants as part of the eradication campaign that was about to start just two days later.³⁶ For decades, the U.S. had attempted to convince the Mexican Attorney General to employ herbicides. Even though the Mexican government conducted herbicide experiments on marijuana and opium poppy fields in June 1975 in the surroundings of Culiacán,³⁷ the announcement of November 1975 surprised farmers and university agronomists who cautioned that herbicides would

²⁹ United States General Accounting Office, 11.

³⁰ Edward Allen Heath, “Mexican Opium Eradication Campaign” (Master’s Thesis, California State University, 1981), 29.

³¹ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department, “Narcotics Demarche to President Echeverria [Secret],” September 12, 1973, MD00172, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

³² United States General Accounting Office, “Opium Eradication Efforts in Mexico: Cautious Optimism Advised [Confidential]” (GAO, February 17, 1977), 22, MD00323, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

³³ Pedro Ojeda Paullada, “México,” *Drug Enforcement* 3, no. 1 (1975): 9.

³⁴ Horton Jr. Heath, “Interview with Attorney General Pedro Ojeda Paullada,” *Drug Enforcement* 1, no. 5 (Fall 1974): 10.

³⁵ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department, “Narcotics: GOM Submits Requirements for 1974-1975 Campaign [Confidential],” May 25, 1974, 1974MEXICO04359, Wikileaks PlusD, Kissinger Cables.

³⁶ PGR, “Boletín de La Conferencia de Prensa Ofrecida Por Pedro Ojeda Paullada,” November 13, 1975.

³⁷ Advanced Technology Division. Office of Science and Technology DEA, “1975 Northwestern Mexico Intensive Poppy Eradication Campaign and the Compass Trip (MOPS) Participation [Sensitive in Confidence],” July 21, 1975, 12, MD00254, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

ruin coffee crops, cause pollution, destroy livelihoods, and result in deforestation. Notwithstanding the opposition, the campaign was launched as planned.

Two months later, in January 1976, Alejandro Gertz Manero, national coordinator of Mexico's anti-drug trafficking campaign, forecasted that the use of herbicides would end the cultivation of drugs in Mexico before mid-year. He also emphasized that only drug traffickers and their accomplices opposed the strategy.³⁸

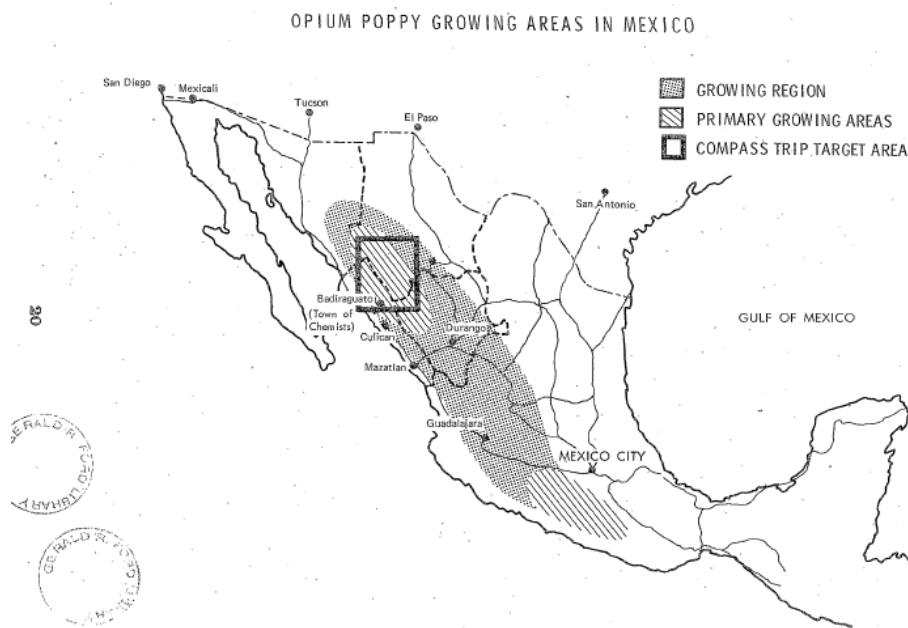


Figure 3: DEA, Office of Intelligence, DEA Quarterly Intelligence Trends Intelligence Report [confidential], Spring 1975.

The Joint Opium Eradication Campaign

The initial phase of the 1976 Joint Opium Eradication Campaign was inaugurated on November 15, 1975 and concluded on April 15, 1976. Phase II began in September 1976 and continued until November 1976.

In preparation for the new campaign the Technical Institute of the Attorney General's Office trained "two classes of specialized narcotic agents," and allocated "40 new agents for the Federal Public Ministry, 25 agents for intermediate commands, and a 120-man force to pilot helicopters [and] to

³⁸ Elias Chávez, "Sí, Estamos Usando Herbicidas y Vamos a Acabar Con La Siembra de Estupefacientes," *Excelsior*, January 8, 1976, 11.

operate remote sensor systems.”³⁹ In total, the Attorney General had some 38 rotary-wing aircraft and a similar number of fixed-wing aircraft available for the reconnaissance missions.⁴⁰ The DEA called the campaign TRIZO, since the campaign encompassed three different zones. Zone 1 covered the area formed by Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Durango, the so-called Golden Triangle. Zone 2 included the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, Zacatecas, and Michoacán. Finally, Guerrero, Oaxaca and Morelos were assigned to Zone 3. In Mexico the campaign was coined Operation CANADOR, an acronym of *cannabis* and *adormidera* (poppy). As explained above, from January 1976 onwards, the novel feature was the use of aircraft to chemically fumigate opium poppy. Although spraying missions were conducted in all 3 zones, most operations took place in zone I, the traditional poppy growing area. Typically, “two helicopters conducted a spraying mission with one actually spraying while the other, acting as a cover and spotter ship, pointed out opium fields, provided security for the spray ship, and transported extra fuel and herbicides.”⁴¹

DEA’s central participation in TRIZO is known due to 61 recently declassified daily intelligence reports sent by the DEA offices in Mazatlán and Culiacán to the Regional Office in Mexico City, and 23 weekly reports sent from the U.S. Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State. In addition to that, Edward Heath, former regional supervisor of the DEA in Mexico, wrote a very insightful master’s thesis about the role played by the DEA in the eradication campaign.

For TRIZO, the DEA Mexico City Regional Office initiated a recruitment process in the U.S. for experienced personnel to participate in the campaign and utilized the staff attached to the Regional Office in supervisory and advisory capacities.⁴² Overall, the direct participation of the DEA during TRIZO included 38 special agents, pilots, and advisors, either from the Mexican City regional office or on temporary assignment from the United States.⁴³ In addition, U.S. participation included “about 36 narcotic program-funded advisors, either under contract or on temporary assignment, including 5 U.S. funded spray pilots, 18 aviation and mechanical personnel, and advisors in communications and opium poppy detection.”⁴⁴ Most of the pilots were hired from Evergreen International Aviation, a private firm with longstanding ties to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), whose pilots were mostly Vietnam veterans. That brought suspicions among Mexican officials that some pilots, advisors, or technicians working in Mexico were CIA agents, a worry never completely clarified.⁴⁵

In general, the lack of basic helicopter piloting experience precluded local MFJP personnel from being included in the missions. In a move that shows the concerns of the Mexican government over political sensibilities, campaign coordinator Gertz Manero asked the U.S. Ambassador in Mexico to identify “any Mexican or other Spanish Surname available in the U.S. who might be brought down on

³⁹ Ojeda Paullada, “México,” 7.

⁴⁰ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published),” 23.

⁴¹ United States General Accounting Office, “Opium Eradication Efforts in Mexico: Cautious Optimism Advised [Confidential],” 25.

⁴² Drug Enforcement Administration, “Status Report Operation TRIZO: Summary Report,” 1977, 6, MD00275, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁴³ United States General Accounting Office, “Opium Eradication Efforts in Mexico: Cautious Optimism Advised [Confidential],” 25.

⁴⁴ United States General Accounting Office, 25.

⁴⁵ Simons, “The U.S.-Mexico Drug War Feud: Drug War Feud Seen in Mexico.”

contract.”⁴⁶ DEA personnel, aircraft, and spray equipment arrived at a rather slow pace, “but those numbers were markedly increased during the gradual eradication build-up.”⁴⁷ By January 1976, the U.S. presence in Mexico was almost complete.

DEA agents were fully involved in the operation of the campaign but did not run the equipment or mix herbicides. During the first phase, in addition to accompanying Mexican officials on similar flights, DEA agents and pilots flew separate aircraft to conduct their own reconnaissance and destruction-verification missions.

The objective of conducting or accompanying MFJP officers in reconnaissance and destruction verification missions of opium poppy and marijuana fields were threefold. First, to ensure that crops were spotted correctly and herbicides effectively sprayed. Second, to obtain detailed information about the location opium plantations, in order to organize most of the joint interdiction efforts on primary and secondary roads. Third, DEA agents were charged with assessing the effectiveness of the campaign and recommending appropriate modifications either to the Mexican zone coordinator, to the DEA’s regional intelligence office, or to DEA Headquarters.

By September 1977, the use of DEA aircraft for reconnaissance missions was prohibited by the Mexican Attorney General. According to DEA Regional Director for Mexico, Jacques Kiere, this was because of concerns “that the presence of an American aircraft over [Mexican] soil might create some political problems for them.”⁴⁸ As a result the DEA lost “a certain amount of the flexibility” to ensure “with (their) own eyes that the eradication has properly taken place.”⁴⁹

A confidential cable dated January 1976, recognized that, in general, the relationship between MFJP officers and DEA agents was strained “possibly due to the vast pressure that was applied from [MFJP] headquarters at Mexico City to conduct a successful operation while having to deal with DEA’s presence as an avowed *watchdog*.”⁵⁰

In a 1978 Congressional Hearing, DEA’s agent Jerry Kelly admitted that in addition to participating in the reconnaissance mission, he evaluated and discussed the statistics that were coming from the field with the Mexican zone coordinator, and “had access to the reports of arrested campesinos.”⁵¹ Depending on the personal relationships between the DEA staff and the MFJP and the federal prosecutors, the agents had a wider or narrower space for pursuing their goals. While, for instance, Kelly mentioned a very cooperative relationship with Mexican pilots, in some other areas MFJP comandantes refused to allow DEA agents to fly in helicopters or to accompany the MFJP during fumigation missions. In other cases, the agents were not even allowed to be present at *forward bases* where the helicopters were refueled.

⁴⁶ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department, “Call on Mexican Attorney General [Confidential],” December 24, 1975, MD00266, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁴⁷ Drug Enforcement Administration, “Status Report Operation TRIZO: Summary Report,” 7.

⁴⁸ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published),” 24.

⁴⁹ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 24.

⁵⁰ Drug Enforcement Administration, “Status Report Operation TRIZO: Summary Report,” 11.

⁵¹ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published),” 27.

The DEA maintained centers of operation in each of the three regions. For Zone 1, the DEA used its office in Culiacán, and opened a temporary facility in Mazatlán. For Zone 2 the DEA used its office in Guadalajara, and established a small subsidiary in Uruapan, Michoacán. Finally, in Zone 3, the agency opened an office in Acapulco. Normally, DEA personnel assigned to each zone maintained weekly meetings in each of the three main centers of operation. Each zone of the country was divided into separate fumigation bases. For example, in the case of Zone I, the region was divided into bases located at Mazatlán, Culiacán, San José del Llano, Topia and Coix. With the exception of Topia, DEA agents were assigned to each of these bases.

The 1976 campaign was characterized by the DEA as a success. The number of fields destroyed in the campaign exceeded that of previous operations with a lower “amount of physical exertion and more logistical and operational control.”⁵² Furthermore, the program appeared to have had an effect on the U.S. market, with DEA statistics showing the price of opium doubling in Sinaloa, the purity of seizures and purchases of street heroin dropping, and heroin-related deaths falling by 62 percent from 1976 to 1977.⁵³

Operation Condor, an extension of TRIZO, was officially launched in January 1977. Like TRIZO, Condor involved the use of aerial spraying of herbicides. However, three changes were made: the participation of the military was increased, the “three zones” used previously were abandoned (Condor worked on the basis of thirteen zones), and DEA participation in the campaign was diminished.⁵⁴

The End of DEA Supervision

In early January 1978 the Mexican government decided to end DEA supervision over the campaign. The move was driven in part by the nationalist impulses of former president José López Portillo, but more directly due to a dispute between both governments over natural gas prices.⁵⁵ According to several sources, the administration of López Portillo wanted to use the DEA temporary duty agents (TDY) as leverage to obtain a better position in negotiations with the U.S. over the export of natural gas. Another explanation is that former Defense Minister, Félix Galván Sánchez, lobbied to get the DEA out of Mexico. In any case, DEA supervision over the campaign had effectively ended by May 1978.

Recent declassified cables of the U.S. State Department shed light on the decision of the Mexican government to disallow the presence of TDY in Mexico. On January 13, 1978, the Attorney General's Executive Officer, Fernando Baeza, admitted to DEA agent Ralph Saucedo the intention of Mexican Attorney General Óscar Flores Sánchez to curtail U.S. participation in the eradication campaign. He added that the Attorney General believed that:

DEA participation serves no purpose since the TDY personnel know less about poppy characteristics than Mexican personnel, they have a negative impact on Mexican employees who feel that the Attorney General is using Americans as watchdogs, they constitute a political

⁵² Heath, “Mexican Opium Eradication Campaign,” 33.

⁵³ Heath, 36.

⁵⁴ The absence of reliable information doesn't allow to determine the amount of military forces and MFJP operatives deployed for Condor. Estimations vary from just 1,200 men to more than 10,000.

⁵⁵ For this, see: Jesus Puente Leyva, “The Natural Gas Controversy,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 34, no. 1 (1981): 158–67.

liability, and that the presence of foreign participants offends the extreme sensibility of the Mexican military.⁵⁶

Fernando Baeza did not admit to sharing the opinion of his chief but expressed “that the good will and wholehearted participation of the military are much more essential than the participation of DEA personnel.”⁵⁷ In any case, Baeza requested that Saucedo reduce the DEA TDY personnel - scheduled to arrive just two days later - by half.

On February 1978, during a United Nations Conference in Geneva, Assistant Attorney General Samuel Alba Leyva announced to DEA Administrator Peter Bensinger that the role of the DEA’s presence as observer in the eradication campaign “would be reassessed with a view to having carefully selected DEA personnel working year-round with the Mexicans in the campaign, in contrast to the present TDY mode.”⁵⁸ In that same meeting, he admitted that widespread Mexican dissatisfaction with bilateral issues such as natural gas pricing and “undocumented aliens” played an important role in the decision.⁵⁹ From March 1978, TDY agents were not permitted to fly with zone coordinators of the campaign.⁶⁰ Some alternatives were considered to “provide the DEA a graceful exit from the campaign.” For example, Baeza suggested that DEA agents could stay as “trainees”⁶¹ for a few more weeks. Another option was to replace the TDY agents with monitors associated to the United Nation Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC), a model applied in Turkey as well.⁶² None of these alternatives gained traction, and on March 8, 1978, the DEA pilots flew home.

Naturally, DEA officials working in Mexico suspected that the real motivations behind López Portillo’s decision had less to do with nationalism, and more with the desire of the military to get rid of supervision, and profit from corruption. In addition to that, there were serious allegations that close associates of Óscar Flores Sánchez were “class one narcotics traffickers.”⁶³

In her book, Elaine Shannon quotes former DEA agents who accused Mexican pilots of spraying water instead of herbicides on the opium poppy fields.⁶⁴ However, there is little concrete evidence to support this. In any case, what really enraged the DEA was the lack of support from their own Departments of Justice and State in convincing the Mexican Attorney General to find a solution.

⁵⁶ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. Department of State, “GOM Requests Elimination of DEA Spotters [Confidential],” January 18, 1978, 1978MEXICO00901, WikiLeaks PlusD, Carter Cables.

⁵⁷ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. Department of State.

⁵⁸ U.S. Mission Geneva to U.S. Department of State, “Mexican/US Cooperation on Narcotics Control [Confidential],” February 15, 1978, 1978GENEVA02362, WikiLeaks PlusD, Carter Cables.

⁵⁹ U.S. Mission Geneva to U.S. Department of State.

⁶⁰ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department, “DEA Participation in GOM Eradication Campaign [Confidential],” March 1, 1978, 1978MEXICO03734, WikiLeaks PlusD, Carter Cables.

⁶¹ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S. State Department.

⁶² U.S. Mission Geneva to U.S. State Department, “Potential UNFDAC Mexico Contacts [Confidential],” March 31, 1978, 1978GENEVA04870, WikiLeaks PlusD, Carter Cables. Eventually, it was agreed that private pilots of a private company, Aviation Associates International (AAI), would take over some observation’s missions. UNFDAC was also very much a product of the U.S. government. See: Kettil Bruun, Lynn Pan, and Ingemar Rexed, *The Gentlemen’s Club: International Control of Drugs and Alcohol* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975).

⁶³ Craig Pyes, “Legal Murders,” *The Village Voice*, June 4, 1979, 12.

⁶⁴ Elaine Shannon, *Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen, and the War America Can’t Win* (New York: Pinguin Books, 1988), 75.

DEA officials were convinced that the issue of narcotics was not a priority for the Carter Administration and that he indeed disliked the agency and its goals. Over time it became clear that they were right.⁶⁵

In 1977, the U.S. National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA) reported that paraquat, one of the many herbicides being spread on marijuana fields in Mexico, caused lung fibrosis when smoked by marijuana consumers in the U.S. According to an independent report published in 1978, around 12.5 percent of the Mexican marijuana entering the U.S. was contaminated with paraquat.⁶⁶ In response to these initial reports, members of the U.S. Congress demanded that President Carter “call an immediate moratorium of all U.S. aid and assistance for the use of paraquat and other dangerous herbicides on marijuana fields in Mexico.”⁶⁷ Even though the Carter administration argued that they were providing funds for the spray of opium poppy fields and not for marijuana, he still tried distance himself politically from the general campaign. As expected, this decision was seen by the DEA as a betrayal to the general policy of curtailing the supply of drugs in Mexico.

With most of DEA advisors and pilots out of Mexico, responsibility for the campaign was taken over by the Narcotics Assistance Unit (NAU), a group of fourteen employees under control of the Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico. The NAU took over almost all obligations previously carried out by the DEA, including being the daily point of contact with the Mexican Attorney General’s office. However, according to a source of Elaine Shannon, the staff of the NAU “was too small and too disorganized to keep up with its own paperwork, much less to go into the countryside to check that fields of poppies and marijuana were actually being sprayed with herbicides [...] NAU officers simply passed along the Mexican government’s figures.”⁶⁸

In spite of everything, the departure of the DEA as a central actor in the eradication efforts did not mean the end the policy. The Mexican government continued (and continues) spraying poppy and marihuana fields with herbicides.

Overall, the campaigns had significant unintended consequences for Mexico. First, they intensified the bureaucratic struggles among all state actors involved, including the Mexican Army and the Attorney General’s Office, who fought for control of the campaign and the possible benefits it could provide. This process would result in an escalation of violence in the years to come.

Second, the campaigns reinforced the idea among *campesinos* that the government was opposed to their interests. During the first and second phase of TRIZO, at least seven helicopters were hit by small arms fire and cables were “being strung across valleys in an attempt to cause the spraying

⁶⁵ The origins of the tensions between the DEA and Carter dated back to the beginning of Carter’s campaign when he supported decriminalization of marijuana and appeared to be in favor of a public health approach to the problem of drug abuse. Once in office, Carter supported and promoted, in October 1977, the decision of the Senate Judicial Committee to decriminalize the possession of up to an ounce of marijuana for personal use. He also appointed Peter Bourne as Special Assistant to the President for Health Issues, who was later accused of using cocaine at a Christmas party of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML).

⁶⁶ C. E. Turner et al., “Detection and Analysis of Paraquat in Confiscated Marijuana Samples,” *Bulletin on Narcotics* 30, no. 4 (47-56): 1978.

⁶⁷ Senator Patrick J. Leahy to Jimmy Carter, “Moratorium on Use of Paraquat,” July 25, 1978, MD00377, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁶⁸ Shannon, *Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen, and the War America Can’t Win*, 122.

helicopters to crash.”⁶⁹ As a matter of fact, on May 14, 1976, two DEA agents, Ralph N. Shaw and James T. Lunn were killed when their spotter plane crashed in the mountains of Atoyac, Guerrero.

Third, Mexican narcotic trafficking patterns changed. Many of the Sinaloan trafficking groups switched to cocaine and found refuge in Guadalajara, the new mecca for drug traffickers in Mexico. Drawing on their experience with laboratory operations, former opium traffickers began to import Peruvian cocaine base, and convert it into cocaine.⁷⁰ According to the DEA, by 1977, about 30 percent of Peru’s annual production of pure cocaine was being shipped to the United States through Mexico.⁷¹

3. Policing the drugs trade

This section aims to examine the DEA’s engagement in policing operations, as well as the human rights concerns that these operations raised among the general public in Mexico and the U.S. As will be shown, during the period 1973-1976, the agency enjoyed considerable freedom to operate in Mexico. In 1977 this freedom was greatly reduced due to two main factors: the enactment of the Mansfield Amendment in 1976, and the less friendly attitude of Mexican authorities towards the DEA.

The years of freedom: 1973-1976

From 1973-1976, DEA agents based at U.S. domestic offices as well as agents attached to the offices in Mexico benefited from almost complete freedom to undertake police operations in Mexico. They recruited informants, conducted surveillance activities, participated in *buy and bust* operations, as well as in seizures, roadblocks, arrests, and interrogations of witnesses. They arrested suspects and were involved in violent events where extrajudicial killings took place.

Until very recently, all these activities remained unknown to the public and even to Mexican officials. They were not reported in open publications or acknowledged in Congressional Hearings. It is only due to a recent process of archival declassification that we can trace DEA activities during this period. The most significant source is a stack of monthly reports sent by the U.S. Embassy to the State Department (*Mission Monthly Narcotics Review*) between August 1973 and July 1975. The following paragraphs are based largely on those reports.

As soon as the DEA was established in the summer of 1973, the Mexican Attorney General began to receive requests from U.S. officials both to reinforce the eradication campaigns in the Mexican Northwest, and to accept the creation of so-called “joint police task forces” composed of both MFJP members and DEA special agents.⁷² The concept of joint task forces in U.S. police jargon usually referred to special units composed of agents and prosecutors from different U.S. law enforcement bodies for a specific purpose. However, in the case of Mexico, joint was a synonym for binational. These

⁶⁹ United States General Accounting Office, “Opium Eradication Efforts in Mexico: Cautious Optimism Advised [Confidential],” 26.

⁷⁰ Heath, “Mexican Opium Eradication Campaign,” 36.

⁷¹ Heath, 36.

⁷² Humberto E. Moreno, “A Different Kind of Good Neighbor Policy,” *Drug Enforcement* 1, no. 5 (Fall 1974): 15.

joint police task forces were designed to prosecute senior-level dealers and undertake undercover operations and conspiracy cases throughout Mexico. This included buy and bust operations, an entrapment technique employed to catch drug dealers which was prohibited under Mexican law but very common in the U.S.

The development of extensive enforcement-oriented operations composed of both Mexican and U.S. law enforcement officials was not entirely new. Recent research has shown their existence since the late 1950s.⁷³ However, there are two main differences between the joint operations that took place before and after the fall of 1973. The first difference is that while policing operations before 1973 used to be agreed upon by FBN or BNDD officials with local or state police located along the border, the joint task forces after 1973 were allowed, promoted, and protected by the Mexican Attorney General. The second difference is that previous operations were mostly limited to the border region, whereas the new ones covered the whole country. Between 1973 and 1975 joint-policing operations took place in Mexico City, Culiacán, Hermosillo, Mexicali, Tequila, Díaz Ordáz (Tamaulipas) Matamoros, Guadalajara, Tijuana, Reynosa, Mazatlán, Chihuahua, San Luis (Sonora), Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Acapulco, San Isidro, Nogales, Orizaba, Monterrey, Tecate, Talismán (Chiapas), Iguala, Empalme (Sonora) and a dozen other smaller towns.

DEA agents assigned to a joint task force could be attached to a domestic office in the U.S. but spend several days or weeks in Mexico while working on a conspiracy case. They typically posed as American retailers or consumers ready to pay top prices for drugs. Sometimes, the operations included the supervised control of deliveries of illicit drugs. The arrests were usually made by the Mexican authorities but with the support of the agents.

While there is still no definitive record of the number of operations that took place during that period, a review of the above-mentioned *Mission Monthly Narcotics Review* suggests that the DEA assisted the MFJP in the arrest of some 200 suspected drug traffickers in 1973 and around 500 in 1974. A similar number was acknowledged by John T. Cusack, DEA Chief of the International Operations Divisions in a statement submitted to the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives in April 1975.⁷⁴ Many of those arrests were either of individuals transiting Mexico *en route* from Colombia with a quantity of cocaine ready to be smuggled to the U.S., or individuals purchasing heroin and marijuana in Mexico for transport north.⁷⁵

The archives offer accounts of at least three violent episodes in which DEA agents —Rogelio Guevara, Antonio Celaya, and a third one whose surname was Garcia— were gravely injured. The archives also contain accounts of other events in which MFJP officials, and dozens of suspects, were killed. While there is very little research on this, it is probable that no judicial investigations resulted from those events.

In addition to undertaking prosecution cases and undercover operations, the DEA participated actively in interdiction efforts. In early 1974, as part of Operation SEAM, the DEA requested extra funding for the purchase of special interdiction vans and roadblock equipment to be used in both urban

⁷³ Pérez Ricart, "Policing the Drug Trade: U.S. Narcotic Agents in Mexico (1936-1963)."

⁷⁴ "U.S. Citizens Imprisoned in Mexico Part I (Hearings Published)," 1975, 67, HRG-1975-HIR-0038, Congressional Publications.

⁷⁵ "U.S. Citizens Imprisoned in Mexico Part I (Hearings Published)," 68.

and rural areas. The plan stated that DEA participation would “be limited to one agent per unit.”⁷⁶ The money was granted, and roadblocks were established in primary and secondary roads all around the country and continued until the end of 1976.

Even though many seizures took place and the arrest of important drug traffickers was accomplished, journalists and opposition politicians started to complain about the DEA presence in Mexico. The criticism was triggered after the publication of a 1975 *New York Times* article that highlighted DEA operations in the country. The State Department recognized the political problem immediately, and in a briefing paper written by the Department of State for Gerard Ford before a meeting with Foreign Secretary Emilio Rabasa, it was acknowledged that the Mexican Government was “unhappy about its vulnerability to domestic criticism for allowing DEA personnel to operate on Mexican soil.”⁷⁷ In early 1975 during a breakfast meeting, Mexico’s Attorney General suggested to U.S. Ambassador Jova that DEA agents “should withdraw when arrests or possible shootings may occur.” He added that the presence of DEA agents “was too obvious in the mountains and could cause political trouble.”⁷⁸

In the context of this pressure, and with the clear interest of avoiding problems with the Mexican Government, in early 1975, Ambassador Jova expressed his desire to the State Department to establish guidelines for DEA’s operation in Mexico. In response, John S. Ingersoll, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, suggested that while he supported the idea, the Ambassador needed to accept enforcement-oriented operations by DEA agents in the country “including raids, seizures, roadblocks, arrests, and interrogations (except, of course, in instances in which you find such participation would constitute an unwarranted risk).”⁷⁹ He reminded Jova that Mexico had “encouraged an active DEA role” in law enforcement operations and that while he realized that “such a DEA role could lead to distorted publicity here or in Mexico and to ill-founded criticism [...] we are prepared to accept that risk.”⁸⁰

Finally, In April 1975 Ambassador Jova established guidelines for DEA activities in Mexico. As requested by the DEA and State Department, DEA agents were allowed to develop informants and conduct surveillance during criminal investigations. In addition, enforcement actions were allowed if they were done in concert with the MFJP. As suggested, raids and seizures were accepted “if the presence or participation of DEA agents is required for the successful conclusion of the action.” DEA was asked to “maintain a low profile and remain in the background as much as possible.” Arrests would be carried out exclusively by Mexican authorities, and DEA agents should, if possible, withdraw whenever arrests or shootings were likely to occur.⁸¹ Jova’s guidelines also accepted DEA agents

⁷⁶ U.S State Department to U.S. Embassy Mexico, “DEA Request for FAA [Foreign Assistance Act] Funding of Operation SEAM/75 [Confidential],” December 24, 1974, MD00216, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁷⁷ U.S Department of State, “Bilateral Talks during OASGA Mexico: Foreign Secretary Emilio O. Rabasa. Confidential Background Paper,” April 1975, 5, MD00235, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁷⁸ U.S. Embassy Mexico to U.S Department of State, “Breakfast Meeting with Mexican Attorney General [Confidential],” February 25, 1975, 1975MEXICO01693, Wikileaks PlusD, Kissinger Cables.

⁷⁹ Robert S. Ingersoll to U.S. Embassy Mexico, “Guidelines for DEA [Confidential],” January 24, 1975, MD00220, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁸⁰ Ingersoll to U.S. Embassy Mexico.

⁸¹ Joseph J. Jova to DEA HQS and State Department, “Guidelines for DEA Operation in Mexico [Confidential],” April 8, 1975, MD00238, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

carrying weapons and participating in interrogations of prisoners with authorization from the Mexican government. If torture occurred, DEA agents were “to withdraw from the premises immediately.”⁸² *De facto*, the guidelines also allowed the deportation or removal of suspects from Mexico to the U.S. without any judicial order. In summary, DEA agents still had significant operational leeway in Mexico.

Unfortunately, the *Mission Monthly Narcotic Reports* stopped being produced after June 1975. Therefore, it is difficult to know when and if the joint policing operations stopped taking place, a question of particular interest after the publication of the Mansfield Amendment in 1976.

The years of contention: 1977-1980

In June of 1976 the U.S. Congress enacted the so-called Mansfield Amendment to the *Internal Security Assistance and Arms Export Act* of 1961. The Amendment provided that “no officer or employee of the United States may engage or participate in any direct police arrest action in any foreign country with respect to narcotics control efforts.” Even though the question of what constitutes a “direct police arrest action” remained a question of controversy for some years, the Amendment had tremendous implications for DEA agents in Mexico when it came to undercover operations. Concretely, it meant that DEA agents had to hold back until their Mexican partners had the situation under control. This was detrimental to the legitimacy of DEA agents in Mexico. In the words of Travis Kuykendall, DEA agent in Mexico between 1972 and 1978 “the greatest motivator [for the Mexicans] was that we were willing to go out and risk our own rear ends for our country. The Mexicans [then] said, You guys are not serious about this. They lost faith in us. They didn’t go. They started lying, and they started taking money”.⁸³

The Mansfield Amendment restricted agents from being present in any situation where “violence is reasonably foreseeable,” from engaging “in any activities prohibited by the host government,” and from becoming “involved in investigations strictly of a local nature, except in response to special requests from host country officials for on-the-job training or other investigative expertise.”⁸⁴ The new guidelines also made clear that DEA involvement in foreign countries should be “limited to a low-profile role consistent with maximum effectiveness,” and that “no DEA representatives shall carry out any activity prohibited by United States law, regulations or executive orders.” The presence of DEA agents at the time of an arrest by foreign officials was to be “determined on a case-by-case basis.” All of this had a major impact on how DEA operated abroad.

Unfortunately, due to the absence of reliable sources, it is still not clear how joint policing operations changed in Mexico after the Mansfield Amendment. In every congressional hearing they participated in from 1976 onwards, DEA’s officials denied the involvement of DEA agents in “anything that would infringe on the sovereign rights of the country of Mexico.”⁸⁵ However, archival research shows that notwithstanding the limitations entailed in the Mansfield Amendment and the formal

⁸² Jova to DEA HQS and State Department.

⁸³ Quoted by: Shannon, *Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen, and the War America Can’t Win*, 529.

⁸⁴ Peter B. Bensinger to All Regional Directors, “DEA Functions and Guidelines Relating to Operation in Foreign Countries,” June 4, 1976.

⁸⁵ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published),” 28.

guidelines of the agency, DEA agents continued to participate in disrupting drug distribution systems based in Mexico after June of 1976. These operations were supported by the establishment in 1973 of the Central Tactical (CENTAC) program, which was specially designed to investigate drug organizations that cut across state, regional, and international borders.⁸⁶ Many of the twenty-one CENTAC investigations organized by the DEA between 1974 and 1981 began or ended with undercover operations in Mexico.⁸⁷ Such operations were conducted as early as February 1974 and involved seizures and arrests in Mexico City, Tijuana, and Guadalajara.⁸⁸ Other CENTAC operations occurred between 1976 and 1979 against traffickers such as Sicilia Falcón (CENTAC 12), Jaime Herrera (CENTAC 19) and José Valenzuela (CENTAC 16), and involved DEA agents in Mexico.⁸⁹

While potentially in violation of the Mansfield amendment, the CENTAC operations were highly successful, evidenced by the fact that, by mid-1979, of the fifteen major traffickers identified in 1977 by the DEA, eleven were in jail, two were dead and only two remained fugitives.⁹⁰ In a special report edited by the *Arizona Republic* (with information very probably leaked by a DEA agent), MPFJ chief Raúl Mendiola Cerecero and Mexican Assistant Attorney General Samuel Alba Leyva praised the “tremendous cooperation” with the DEA that resulted in the detention of traffickers like Jorge Favela, Roberto Beltrán, and the aforementioned Herrera. The success of these operations contrast with other reported comments made by Mexican government officials which complained that DEA agents never presented them “an intelligent plan” and that “all they do is drink daiquiris in hotel bars.”⁹¹

Overall, it can be said that the extensive enforcement-oriented operations were very successful in terms of seizures and persons arrested. Much less heroin was entering the U.S. from Mexico, and the twelve mafia families that controlled the exportation of drugs three years earlier were crippled.⁹²

This period can also be identified as the period in which the politics and assumptions of the “kingpin strategy” —the elimination either by death or capture of the leaders of the dominating drug trafficking organizations— was first introduced in Mexico. The strategy was very successful in terms of getting institutional rewards for the DEA, but it proved to be completely ineffective in diminishing the supply of drugs to the U.S. What is more, the politics of focusing policing operations on eliminating kingpins proved to be a driver of violence.⁹³

The “success” of the DEA in detaining these leaders and the overall law enforcement strategy of the agency in Mexico were also heavily criticized by observers who saw such efforts as an excuse to undertake what they considered to be counterinsurgency operations. Independent journalists

⁸⁶ Martin F. Pera, “Central Tactical Unit Five,” *Drug Enforcement* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 13.

⁸⁷ Orr Kelly, “New Strategy against Drug Rings: Dramatic Story of a Successful ‘Bust,’” *Drug Enforcement* 4, no. 3 (December 1977): 36–39.

⁸⁸ “U.S., Mexico Jointly Announce Attack on Amphetamine Traffic,” *Drug Enforcement* 1, no. 5 (Fall 1974): 13.

⁸⁹ Peter B. Bensinger, “DEA Today,” *Drug Enforcement* 4, no. 2 (August 1977): 36.

⁹⁰ “The Mexico Connection,” *The Arizona Republic*, July 22, 1979, 3.

⁹¹ Marlise Simons, “Mexico Rejects ‘Scapegoat’ Role on Drugs,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 1976.

⁹² “12 Clanes Mexicanos En El Tráfico de Heroína,” *Proceso*, June 25, 1977.

⁹³ For this discussion: Nathan Jones, “The Unintended Consequences of Kingpin Strategies: Kidnap Rates and the Arellano-Félix Organization,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16, no. 2 (2013): 156–76; Gabriela Calderón et al., “The Beheading of Criminal Organizations and the Dynamics of Violence in Mexico,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (2015): 1455–85.

contended that the ulterior motivation of the massive military presence in the mountains, the roadblocks and the enforcement-oriented operations was not the elimination of drug cultivation but rather a war against farmers and armed revolutionaries.⁹⁴ While Mexican authorities rejected these allegations by denying the existence of rural guerrillas in heavy drug areas, the fact is, that U.S. agencies did have the suspicion that one of the motivations of the MFJP and the military to participate in U.S.-driven counternarcotic efforts was to monopolize the illegal market while disrupting guerrilla activities.⁹⁵

Human rights concerns

While, there is still a gap in the literature relating to the intersection between Mexico's Dirty War and the war on drugs,⁹⁶ the fact that human rights violations were perpetrated by the Military and the MFJP during the counternarcotic efforts that took place between 1973 and 1980 is undisputable. Particularly in Sinaloa, practices such as beatings, forced (but often false) confessions, were common. By the end of 1978, a Mexican bar association undertook a survey among 457 prisoners accused of drug related crimes in Sinaloa and documented eighteen different forms of torture practiced by Mexican narcotic officials.⁹⁷ According to the survey of that Association, 85 percent of the prisoners were *campesinos jornaleros* (agricultural day laborers) accused of cultivating opium. The imprisonment of those *campesinos* not only caused a problem of prison overcrowding but also disrupted social stability in that region.⁹⁸ Even more striking are the cases of extrajudicial killings and disappearances perpetrated by soldiers and federal police officers in the late seventies in Sinaloa, many of which have been verified by scholars and journalists, but which have remained unacknowledged by the government.⁹⁹

Since the mid-1975 it was common to read about accusations of human rights violations perpetrated by the Military and the Federal Police in the presence of DEA agents in newspapers and periodicals.¹⁰⁰ Likely, the most comprehensive article on this issue was written by Craig Pyes for *The Village Voice* in 1979. Published after six months of investigation in Mexico, the article alleged that "systematic torture and extortion of Mexican citizens has occurred while American agents stood by

⁹⁴ For example: Lawrence Wright, "Mainlining the Mexican Revolution," *New Times* 7 (September 1976): 21–32; Mary Jo McConahay, "Mexico's War on Poppies and Peasants," *New Times* 7 (1976): 33–38.

⁹⁵ For example: Central Intelligence Agency, "Increases in Military Antinarcotics Units [Secret]," December 2, 1983, MD00404, MEX-USA-C.P-DNSA.

⁹⁶ The first attempt is: Adela Cedillo, "Intersections between the Dirty War and the War on Drugs in Northwestern Mexico (1969-1985)" (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2019).

⁹⁷ Francisco Ortíz Pinchetti, "Sinaloa: Un Trasplante de Sudamérica: La Operación Cóndor, Letanía de Horrores," *Proceso* 101 (October 7, 1978): 6.

⁹⁸ Ortíz Pinchetti, 6–7.

⁹⁹ Diego Enrique Osorno, *El Cártel de Sinaloa: Una Historia Del Uso Político Del Narco* (Ciudad de México: Grijalbo, 2009), 156–59; Ortíz Pinchetti, "Sinaloa: Un Trasplante de Sudamérica: La Operación Cóndor, Letanía de Horrores"; Juan Antonio Fernández Velázquez, "La operación cóndor en los altos de Sinaloa: la labor del estado durante los primeros años de la campaña antidroga," *Ra Ximhai*, June 30, 2018, 63–84; Ignacio Ramírez, "La Operación Cóndor Extiende Sus Alas Homicidas," *Proceso*, November 17, 1979; Adela Cedillo, "The Drugged Condor: The Transformation of Outlaw Peasants into Counterinsurgency Targets in Northwestern Mexico during the 1970s," forthcoming.

¹⁰⁰ Stanley Meisler, "U.S. Embassy Role Hit: American Charge Mexican Torture in Drug Confessions," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1974.

without protests.”¹⁰¹ Pyes affirmed that most of the cases of torture and extortion occurred in Culiacán, Sinaloa, an area where the DEA “jointly coordinated the operation and conducted a major field-training program for MFJP agents.”¹⁰² According to Pyes, MFJP agents and narcotics prisoners affirmed that “DEA agents knew about these practices, and on occasion were present and witnessed the interrogations.”¹⁰³

A special DEA agent confessed to Pyes that while agents were not present during the interrogations, they had no problem in giving the Mexicans a list of questions for interrogations. This led to what Pyes labelled a “curious process” in which instead of DEA agents professionalizing the Mexican police, they became dependent on their methods.¹⁰⁴ The ultimate “and most cynical” expression of this, continued Pyes, was the recommendation made by a DEA border officer in a General Accounting Office report suggesting that Mexican nationals caught smuggling narcotics into the U.S. should be turned back over to the MFJP “if law enforcement questioning in the US was unsuccessful.” Apparently, in Mexico prisoners were “more induced to cooperate”.¹⁰⁵

As would be expected, DEA officials rejected the accusations when publicly confronted and reiterated the narrative that DEA agents did not participate in any direct police actions in the country. In 1975, John T. Cusack went as far as to argue that “there is not a single instance recorded for an agent of DEA or its predecessors’ agencies abusing prisoners abroad in 40 years of operations.”¹⁰⁶ DEA officials maintained that the presence of DEA field agents had “mitigation effects” on the activities of the MFJP.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, DEA agents were to report any violations of human rights directly to the office of the DEA’s regional director in Mexico who then reported them to the Ambassador.¹⁰⁸

A second accusation by the U.S. media was that the DEA ignored track records of human rights violations when selecting Mexican top officials to be supported trained and promoted. The DEA led trainings for Mexican officials in counternarcotics operations and provided seminars on almost every aspect related to drug enforcement, including topics such as “addiction, firearms, history of narcotics, and use and identification of drugs.” Participants came from a wide variety of professional backgrounds including “psychiatrists, sociologists, criminal lawyers, police, and military personal.”¹⁰⁹ By the end of 1974, two thirds of MFJP officers had attended at least one of the bi-national schools organised by the DEA.¹¹⁰ By 1978 Bensinger, DEA’s Administrator, said that over five hundred Mexican law enforcement officers had been trained by the DEA “in the last several years”.¹¹¹

¹⁰¹ Pyes, “Legal Murders,” 11.

¹⁰² Pyes, 11.

¹⁰³ Pyes, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Pyes, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Pyes, 15.

¹⁰⁶ “U.S. Citizens Imprisoned in Mexico Part I (Hearings Published),” 69.

¹⁰⁷ Pyes, “Legal Murders,” 11.

¹⁰⁸ Craig Pyes, “Interview Jacques Kiere,” *Stone Age*, 1978, 50.

¹⁰⁹ United States General Accounting Office, “Efforts to Stop Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Coming from and through Mexico and Central America,” 26–27.

¹¹⁰ United States General Accounting Office, 27.

¹¹¹ Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, “The Mexican Connection (Hearings Published),” 13.

Far from considering relevant accusations of extra judicial killings and torture, the DEA endorsed and stayed loyal to those officers who demonstrated loyalty to DEA projects. The most illustrative case is that of Carlos Aguilar Garza, the former prosecutor in Michoacán and Attorney General's coordinator of Operation Condor, whose rise, at the age of twenty-six, to the top of Mexican drug enforcement was orchestrated by the DEA. According to DEA sources quoted by Craig Pyes, the "DEA made Garza's reputation by feeding him cases, bringing him to the attention of higher-ups in Mexico City."¹¹² His was not the only example. Other top officials like Salvador del Toro, *El fiscal de Hierro* (The Iron Attorney), and MPFJ *comandante* González Calderoni were also highly regarded by the DEA despite of severe accusations of human rights violations. The paradox is that many of the promoted officials, including Aguilar Garza, ended up being accused of trafficking drugs themselves.

Conclusions

On February 7, 1985, DEA special agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena was kidnapped near the U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara, Mexico. Camarena's body was eventually found on March 5 in rural Michoacán next to the body of Captain Alfredo Zavala Avelar, a Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources pilot, who had flown missions for Camarena. The corpses were badly decomposed and showed signs of physical abuse; one had a fractured skull.¹¹³ A later investigation revealed that Camarena had been subjected to thirty hours of torture.

Local and international media outlets rapidly spread the news about the brutal murder and the DEA launched an unprecedented investigation. Two well-known drug traffickers, Rafael Caro Quintero and Ernesto Fonseca, quickly emerged as the main suspects and were captured, jailed, and prosecuted within a matter of weeks. However, the DEA investigation lasted continued, and dozens of individuals were convicted both in the U.S. and Mexico.

Camarena, who was posted to Guadalajara in 1980, was the first DEA agent murdered overseas since the creation of the agency in the summer of 1973. Camarena almost instantly turned into a symbol of the DEA's fight against drugs and became the focus of magazine stories, books, and even a TV series. At the entrance of the DEA Museum, visitors can still find a huge memorial dedicated to the former agent. Until this day, he remains the most visible symbol of the DEA's commitment to the war on drugs.

Camarena's murder drew the interest of many public officials, journalists and scholars, who began asking questions about the nature of Camarena's work and the DEA's role in Mexico. The official narrative of the Mexican Government, as well as that of the DEA itself, maintained that DEA agents in foreign countries were there to "support local law enforcement agencies via training, intelligence sharing, and the provision of technical assistance and advice."¹¹⁴ However, this narrative left many important details unsolved: How many agents were in the country and what were the aims and key

¹¹² Pyes, "Legal Murders," 11.

¹¹³ Richard J. Meislin, "Body of U.S. Drug Agent Believed Found in Mexico," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1985, 1.

¹¹⁴ Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, "U.S. Citizens Imprisoned in Mexico Part II (Hearings Published)," 15.

activities of these agents on Mexican soil? What was their legal status in Mexico? How many other agents were stationed in Mexico? Which was the Mexican governmental institution in charge of monitoring the activities of the agents in the country? Were the agents made to adhere to formal guidelines when working in Mexico? While these types of questions drove media reports, and even academic publications in the late eighties and early nineties, the lack of access to reliable sources of information and the classified status of most governmental reports made it impossible to give a comprehensive account of the DEA's activities in Mexico before Camarena's murder.

Drawing on the original examination of recently declassified cables, letters, intelligence reports, and internal memoranda produced by a variety of state and non-state actors, this article aimed to establish the extent of DEA activities in Mexico between 1973 and 1980. To my knowledge, this is the first publication to use these primary sources to this purpose. While it does offer a comprehensive account of the operations of DEA agents, further research is still needed to uncover the social and political consequences of their presence in Mexico.

The DEA clearly played a fundamental role in shaping the operation of Mexican eradication campaigns as well as the way that the Mexican anti-drug operations were organized. However, the DEA's operations in Mexico were deeply limited by both U.S. foreign policy and Mexican political realities, and the agency had very little margin to operate when the State Department, U.S. Congress, or the Mexican government, sometimes in combination, made proactive efforts to its activities. Regarding this, the article also showed how, depending on the political climate, the Mexican government had inconsistent positions towards the DEA's presence in the country.

Much more remains to be written about the activities of the DEA in Mexico. While this article is being written the DEA maintains eleven offices and dozens of agents working in Mexico, and thereby continues to wage the war on drugs down south. Very little is known about these agents' activities, their main contacts and their strategies. However, the historical examination of their activities may offer us a clue of the logics that drive the current Mexican war on drugs and, very likely, a hint on how to stop it.