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Author(s): Richard Craig
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RICHARD CRAIG
Department of Political Science
Kent State University
Kent, Ohio

OPERATION CONDOR
Mexico's Antidrug Campaign Enters a New Era

In recent years Mexico has demonstrated the capacity to cultivate, process, ship, and transship vast quantities of illegal narcotic drugs. Such activity has traditionally been geared to the realities of domestic poverty, enormous profit, and American demand. Mexican marijuana dominated the U.S. market until quite recently. More importantly from the American viewpoint were the tons of Mexican heroin which saturated U.S. cities in the mid-1970s. Furthermore, Mexico is still the source of vast quantities of psychotropics and an increasingly popular conduit for South American cocaine.

According to Craig (1978), U.S. officials long sought to convince their Mexican counterparts that the key to any effective antidrug program lay in eliminating the illicit product at the source. Until such time that herbicides were applied on a massive scale against marijuana and opium poppies, they argued, the annual Mexican campaign would prove an exercise in futility. The Mexicans listened, studied, and experimented for several years, but it was not until the fall of 1975 that they decided to change the character of their program fundamentally by employ-

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article is a revised and updated version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Latin American Studies Association on April 5, 1979 in Pittsburgh. Mexico's antidrug campaign was known as Operation CANADOR (Combate Contra el Narcotrafico) until 1975; after that date it was called Operation Condor.

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ing defoliants. The decision did not come easily, and there were two primary reasons for the delay. Officials and laymen alike feared the potentially harmful effects of such chemicals. Furthermore, they simply refused to acknowledge publicly what others had long known—that their country had become one of the world's largest heroin producers. To compound matters the problem was growing worse with each passing month. Something drastic had to be done.[1]

In November 1975, following a secret meeting between Mexican Attorney General Pedro Ojeda Paullada and Sheldon Vance, senior adviser to the secretary of state and coordinator for international narcotics affairs, Ojeda Paullada informed the United States that beginning immediately the antidrug *campaña* would include the use of defoliant chemicals. One year later, in the fall of 1976, Operation Condor became the core of this accelerated program. Located in the heart of Mexico's opium-growing region, it has become a domestic and international showpiece. Yet while the unprecedented program has registered very impressive results, it has not terminated the Mexican "connection" entirely. Operation Condor, its accomplishments, promise, and problems, constitutes the focal point of this analysis.

The 1975-1976 Campaign: A Macrocosm

The decision to employ herbicides as the core of Mexico's eradication effort was made public in stages. At a press conference in Mexico City on November 13, 1975, Ojeda Paullada described his government's new approach. It would involve twice the number of federal police, several thousand additional soldiers, numerous aircraft, and the extensive use of sophisticated technology. However, when questioned about herbicides, Ojeda Paullada hedged, observing "the Government of Mexico will under no circumstances conduct or condone operations that could have an adverse effect on the country's ecology. . . . But it does not mean that we should not use herbicides" (Drug

Enforcement, 1975-1976: 11). Early in January 1976, Dr. Alejandro Gertz Manero, the man chosen to head the new *campaña,* was even less subtle when he explained that "there were simply too many fields to destroy on the ground. . . . We're hopeful that the herbicide will make a radical difference" (New York Times, 1976). Two days later, Defense Secretary General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz responded to a reporter's query by admitting that herbicides were being used "experimentally" in the states of Sinaloa and Guerrero. Amidst growing debate on the question, Gertz Manero cleared the air. "Yes, we are using herbicides," he declared on January 7, "and before mid-year we are going to completely end the cultivation of narcotic drugs" (Excelsior, 1976b).

Gertz Manero, like subsequent Mexican officials, was somewhat overly optimistic in his prediction. His frankness was refreshing, however, as it clarified a cardinal point: the 1975-1976 antidrug effort would be unparalleled. In effect, the Mexican government had decided to remove the kid gloves with drug traffickers by: (1) making the campaign truly *permanent;* i.e., year-round, (2) pouring $35 million into the effort, (3) coordinating the program vertically between national and subnational authorities and horizontally between the Justice Department (Procuraduría) and the Army, (4) cooperating more effectively with the United States and other foreign governments, (5) vigorously addressing the problem of drug-related corruption, and (6) using modern technology which featured the aerial application of herbicides.

Primary responsibility for the revitalized campaign was again lodged in the Procuraduría, which coordinates the narcotics activities of the Mexican army and other state and municipal law-enforcement officials. Although often inseparable in practice, we may divide the antidrug efforts of the Procuraduría into two parts: halting cultivation and manufacture of opium poppies, marijuana, and psychotropics; and preventing domestic and international traffic in these and other drugs. Of the two, eradication presented the more direct challenge.

The extent of opium and marijuana cultivation in the fall of 1975 was indeed vast, with the government admitting that 600,000

square kilometers were being utilized, directly or indirectly, for such illicit farming. More importantly from the American perspective was the existence of some 30,000 opium plots, a total that simply could not be destroyed by traditional stick-beating tactics. Instead, the Mexican government employed the most modern aerial technology. Remote sensors, multispectral and infrared photography, and even satellites were used to discover and plot the fields. Some 40 aircraft, the majority of which were helicopters provided by the United States, were used to locate and spray the plots or to ferry soldiers into position to perform the eradication chore. Eleven advanced base camps were established in heavy opium-growing zones to facilitate the rapid transport by helicopter of these troops. The soldiers themselves were better equipped with modern light weapons that often proved the differences between life and death during armed clashes with heretofore better armed growers and traffickers.

Drug-related corruption involving military officers, politicians, and judges received particular attention. To counteract such graft within the army, the secretary of defense sought to remove his men from the enormous temptations inherent in a multimillion dollar drug environment by constantly rotating zonal commanders and lesser officers. While not wholly successful—one would be extremely naive to impose such a standard—it would be difficult to document any major corruption cases involving the officer corps during the revitalized campaña.

The emphasis on greater coordination and cooperation that typified the eradication program also characterized the interdiction phase. Particularly crucial was the excellent working relationship that evolved between Mexican and U.S. drug officials. "This is my third year here," remarked an American narcotics official in January 1976, "but never have we had the working relationship with Mexican officials that we've had since the launching of this year's campaign. In this respect it's a new and much better ball game" (Interview, 1976b). More information was exchanged, extensive use was made by Mexican officers of the expertise of 30 U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents, and greater cooperation was evidenced in the building of conspiracy cases involving drug offenders in the two countries. The addition of some 250 federal police agents proved

indispensable to the dismantling of narcotic laboratories, arrest and prosecution of traffickers, and interdiction of drugs being shipped within and through Mexico. These specially trained, well-paid, and wholly dedicated young men provided the key element in the resounding success of Mexico's revived antidrug effort. Sheldon Vance and DEA head Peter Bensinger summed up the opinion of most observers when they stated that "no single international effort now underway is doing more to combat heroin trafficking than the Mexican Government's eradication program" (U.S. Department of Justice, 1976).

Comparative statistics furnished by the Procuraduría tended to support such praise. Mexican soldiers and federal police destroyed 21,405 opium plots from September 1, 1975 to August 31, 1976, as compared to 13,580 plots during the preceding twelve months; eliminated 16,686 fields of marijuana vis-à-vis 6,762 in 1974-1975; arrested a total of 4,399 individuals on drug charges as compared to 2,752 during the previous period; seized 215 kilograms of cocaine in transit; and dismantled 16 drug processing laboratories. Perhaps even more indicative of the accomplishment and outlook of Mexican narcotics officials during the first year of Operation CANADOR (Combate Contra el Narcotrafico), as the overall antidrug program has since been tabbed, was the opinion of a high-ranking federal police agent in February 1976: "We're really attacking the poppy fields in Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other states; and when we finish wiping them out we're going to launch an all-out drive against the critical triangle, because that is where it's at" (Interview, 1976a).

Operation Condor: A Microcosm

The agent's words reveal two salient aspects of the 1975-1976 program. It was unprecedented in comparison to all preceding campaigns. Yet despite impressive results, it really revealed only the tip of a massive opium-heroin iceberg located in the northwestern states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. The *triángulo crítico,* or Zone VI as it is officially designated, was indeed "where it's at." And there was a lot more of *it* than even the

"realists" had imagined: more opium plots, more processing laboratories, more weapons, more desperate campesinos, more corruption, more lawlessness, and more money. The fact was that no serious interruption in the Mexican heroin connection could be expected until the opium nucleus of Sinaloa and its neighboring states was brought under control. In late 1976 the question thus became: "What is the new López Portillo administration going to do about it?" The answer was not long in coming.

The 1976-1977 campaña began in the fall with little fanfare or publicity. Initially, it appeared to be merely a stepped-up, expanded version of the preceding year. Such impressions vanished, however, in January 1977 when Operation Condor was officially launched in the heart of Mexico's opium citadel. If the first year of Operation CANADOR was best described as "unprecedented," Condor was better termed "war." Frankly admitting that "we will have lost the war" if thousands of opium plots are not destroyed in the triángulo within a three-month period, Mexican authorities promised results to back up words. "It's better to do it than to say it," declared Oscar Flores Sánchez, the new attorney general. "People are already tired of that which has been repeated so many times and yet not fulfilled in actual practice. The results will be better than the words" (Excelsior, 1977). Ultimately, the accomplishments equalled the words, but they were not registered without a prolonged and controversial struggle which is continuing.

Two appointments by President José López Portillo have proved crucial to the continuing success of Operation Condor—Flores Sánchez as procurator and General Félix Galván López as secretary of defense. Longtime friends, both are *norteños,* men well aware of the extent of Mexico's drug situation, and totally dedicated to complying with their president's charge to rid Mexico of the "drug curse." American narcotics officials have been particularly impressed with Florez Sánchez, the man ultimately responsible for the progress of Operation Condor and the overall Mexican effort against drug traffic.

The new attorney general surprised even the most optimistic officials early in January 1977 when he requested the presence of

key Americans, including the ambassador, to discuss the administration's new approach. "The man was amazingly open and enthusiastic," observed a high-ranking American narcotics official; "he opened the meeting by informing us he'd read up on all the treaties relating to drugs between our two states, and asked if *we* would draw up a historical review of such cooperation and include in it *our* current thoughts on improving Mexico's campaign." His goal was "the total elimination of opium poppy cultivation and maximum cooperation with the United States and other countries in the endeavor" (Interview, 1977).

Enthusiasm, commitment, and cooperation notwithstanding, the total elimination of Mexican opium poppy cultivation was, and is, a virtual impossibility. Achievement of such a goal in Sinaloa alone poses a monumental chore. Not only is the state the core of Mexico's heroin industry, it is also a classic microcosm of the good and bad of Mexico's "economic miracle." Sinaloa is the nation's leading agricultural state, the site of Mexico's most advanced farming for export, a major mining center, and the locale of two beautiful yet quite different cities, Mazatlán and Culiacán. On the other hand, it is also the center of grinding poverty, repeated land seizures, open and armed defiance of authority, notorious corruption, martial law, and until very recently the hub of one of the world's largest concentrations of opium-heroin production. The capital city, Culiacán, literally had to be seen and experienced in the 1970s to be believed. Comparisons with the Chicago of the "roaring twenties" have often been offered. Those who put them forth, however, either did not see the Chicago of Al Capone, or the Culiacán of *los traficantes y pistoleros.* The author's personal experience in Culiacán during 1976 leads him to readily concur with Pyes (1977) who observed: "but Culiacán has only 350,000 inhabitants and the equivalent of a St. Valentine's Day Massacre every two weeks."

The extent of lawlessness, corruption, and de facto power of *narcotraficantes* was legend. Even the state's governor, a man often accused of sanctioning such an environment, called the problem "insoluble." In early January 1976, following a partic-

ularly noteworthy daytime gun battle between rival gangs in downtown Culiacán that left at least a dozen dead, Alfonso G. Calderón lamented that "the mafiosos don't show any respect." He went on to describe an area of 21,161 square kilometers, or 49.8% of the state, in which many of the 200,000 campesinos were involved in drug traffic. Why do they do it? "Because," he said, "they want to have a nice pair of pants, a nice hat, and a nice shirt." Like thousands of their countrymen, the Sinaloa campesinos are desperate, and they seek desperate solutions to their problems. The culmination of their plight is clearly reflected in the governor's words: "Even if we bring the entire army to Culiacán, it would not be enough" (Excelsior, 1976a). Perhaps in the long run his prophecy will prove correct, but early in 1977 the new administration set out to prove him wrong. With the inauguration of Operation Condor the inhabitants of Sinaloa must have thought the entire Mexican army had indeed been transferred to the triángulo crítico and headquartered near Culiacán.

The assignment of these 2,500 soldiers, 250 federal police, units of the Mexican air force and navy, state and local police, and an undisclosed number of DEA agents was formidable to say the least. With the launching of Condor I it was revealed that some 11,000 fields of opium and marijuana had already been located in the entire 80,000 square kilometer area of Zone VI. At least 20,000 of the region's campesinos were involved in raising and/or shipping the drugs; each was very well armed and more than willing to defend his illicit product, which brought up to ten times the annual income he had traditionally received from legitimate crops. Two primary tasks thus faced the civilian and military commanders of Condor I: eradication of the illegal crops and pacification of the countryside.

Eradication of thousands of illicit plots, some of which exceeded 40 acres, was to prove no mean task even with the most dedicated men utilizing advanced technology. Without the highest level of cooperation and coordination between federal police and the army it would have proved impossible. And coordination has proved the *sina qua non* of Condor's success. In

the words of an American military attaché (Interview, 1978a): "Condor I was truly remarkable for two reasons—its massive, concentrated use of herbicides and the unprecedented coordination between the Procuraduría and the Army. When Mexico City said 'frog' the Army really jumped."

The eradication process began with high level multispectral reconnaisance photographs, which when developed revealed the numerous marijuana and opium plots. Following confirmation by low-level flights, the opium fields were sprayed by helicopter with 2, 4-D, and the marijuana plots with Gramoxone. Squads of soldiers were then ferried in by helicopter to secure the area and destroy those plants missed from the air. The location of many opium plots in extremely hazardous terrain meant that soldiers did some of the spraying or destroyed the poppies through traditional stick-beating methods. The process often proved hazardous for pilot, soldier, and campesino.

While the total number of federal police and soldiers killed has never been made public, it surely approaches 100; the campesino-trafficker total is certainly much greater. Pilots flying low-level reconnaissance, spraying illicit plots, and transporting soldiers often encountered heavy ground fire. Some crashed while attempting to spray defoliants at acute angles, while still others were killed when their helicopter blades struck wellhidden cables strung from one hillside to another. Numerous lives were lost in pitched battles once the soldiers were discharged from helicopters, as the campesinos occasionally chose to defend their precious plots instead of disappearing into the woods and returning to replant their fields as soon as the soldiers departed.

Pacification of the countryside proved even more difficult than eradication of opium and marijuana fields. Soldiers were charged with restoring law and order in the three-state area of Zone VI. Without a massive military presence the task would have been patently impossible; with it the chore has become only slightly less onerous. The *municipio* of Cosalá, for example, which lies some 100 miles north of Culiacán, discovered a whole new industry in the 1970s: cultivation of the opium poppy. For many if not most of Cosalá's campesinos, opium gum became the first and only

source of cash income they had ever known. Of course it was illegal, but the farmers were adamant, and the mayor was helpless before the hordes of soldiers arrived. "We've got 1,500 square miles of wilderness to cover," he explained to a reporter. "Our police force is six men with three old M-1 rifles among them" (Christian Science Monitor, 1976).

Reaction to the soldiers by residents in other Sinaloa highland *municipios* such as Choix, El Fuerte, Sinaloa de Leyva, Elota, Mocorito, and the legendary Badiraguato was uniformly negative and generally hostile, for despite the sincere desire of many high-ranking officers to win over the campesino, he all too often equates the soldier with the government, an institution that had forgotten he ever existed until he began to live with some degree of dignity. His distrust of all outsiders is well known throughout Mexico, and the army's tactics have done little to change his outlook.

When army units located a known or suspected drug center their orders were clear: "Clean it out!" And they did, completely. In so doing they occasionally went beyond the call of duty. And the word soon spread. According to a well-placed American diplomat in Mexico City (Interview, 1978b): "Look, when these units make ground sweeps through known or suspected drug-producing areas they are occasionally too clean. Houses are ransacked, men beaten, women violated, and belongings confiscated. These tactics, even though they are definitely rare, don't exactly endear the military to the campesinos."[2]

Similar accounts too numerous to be discounted reveal a fundamental problem for national officials. The campesino's plight is obvious to even the most casual observer. With inflation, and apparently even with an increased flow of petrodollars, his problem is growing worse, not better. Figures from the National Bank of Mexico (Excelsior, 1980) depict a disaster for rural Mexico during the 1970s. The agrarian sector grew at only a 2% annual rate in comparison to an overall annual economic growth rate of 6%. In 1970, 58% of Mexico's population lived in rural areas; by 1980 the figure had dropped to 40%. Simultaneously, annual per capita farm income declined from 651 to 575 pesos, as

the total area under cultivation dropped 20%.[3] Between 1973 and 1975 Mexico went from net agrarian exporter to importer. Early in 1980 the farm sector's decline had reached a crisis stage, prompting the government to purchase 10.7 million tons of food grains abroad in order to avert politically explosive food shortages.

Unable to survive off the land, desperate campesinos are flooding the cities, abandoning *ejido* and private plots, seizing haciendas, executing local *caciques,* streaming across the border as illegal immigrants, and becoming drug entrepreneurs. All these activities are disconcerting to Mexico City. But only one of them to date, involvement with narcotics, has caused deep official concern *and* determined action. This had led some writers (McConahay, 1976; Pyes, 1977; Wright, 1976) to conclude that Mexico's war against the poppy may be more accurately termed a war against the peasant and the real or imagined guerrillas of the sierras.

While the army's continuing effort to pacify the countryside has been both difficult and controversial, the restoration of law and order in Culiacán proved equally troublesome and journalistically sensational. Any improvement in the city's ambient was noteworthy, given the situation prior to the inauguration of Operation Condor. Life was cheap, very cheap, in Culiacán. Murders and funerals were so commonplace that local residents came to accept them as normal. Depending on the source, there were between two and three drug-related homicides daily during 1976, "surely a nongovernmental peacetime record for a western city with fewer than 200,000 [sic] inhabitants" (Miami Herald, 1977). Following a year of martial law the figure had been reduced to *only* one killing every three days! Then, and now, many law-abiding citizens lived in fear of *narcotraficantes;* as a result, most carried handguns on their person and high-powered rifles in their automobiles. Vividly recalling her life at the time as a Culiacán teenager, a female student at the University of Veracruz remarked:

> Never, never will I forget those days. Everyone in my family, including my ten-year-old brother, carried a pistol when they left

> the house—even in broad daylight! There simply was no law and order, and it was especially bad for young girls like me. My father dictated that I could never go out alone or even with a boyfriend unless I was accompanied by an older male with a pistol. Two of my girlfriends were gang raped, and in one case my cousin was killed by thugs when he tried to aid his sweetheart. Things really changed when the Army took over, and by 1978 it was pretty safe to go out, even at night [Interview, 1980].

Unfortunately, honest reporters did not share such feelings of security. The Mexican public was shocked and outraged early in February 1978 by the blatant assassination of Roberto Martínez Montenegro, a prize-winning reporter for Culiacán's *El Noroeste* and Mexico City's *Excelsior.* Unlike many of his contemporaries on trafficker payrolls, Martínez Montenegro had continued to expose the extent of drug-related corruption in the city and state. Because of this he was eliminated by two hired *pistoleros.* His murder, the third such killing of a reporter during one five-month period, highlighted the plight of citizens and caused the governor well-deserved embarrassment and discomfort.[4]

When a journalist asked what kind of guarantees he would provide honest reporters in the assassination's wake, Governor Calderón caustically replied: "Guarantees? What kind of guarantees? Do you want me to look after you, little boy?" (Excelsior, 1978). In subsequent weeks the state's chief executive withstood a series of challenges to his authority and integrity. During this time he came to admit that (1) undoubtedly some state and federal officers were protecting traficantes; (2) drug money, in effect, dominated the city and countryside; (3) there were more millionaires and a higher inflation rate in Culiacán than any Mexican city; (4) narcotics traffic was the primary cause of regional violence and lawlessness; (5) a large part of the buildings and hotels in Guadalajara may have been financed by drug money; (6) industrialists, merchants, and professionals wanted to leave Sinaloa because of the violent atmosphere; (7) campesinos became involved with drugs out of dire necessity; and (8) Sinaloa's tourism industry was being severely damaged by the publicity, dangers, and inconveniences resulting from narcotics traffic.

The Martínez Montenegro affair embarrassed not only the governor but Mexico City as well. Operation Condor's accomplishments were slighted in the aftermath, and this was unfortunate because they were most impressive. Wholesale drug prices doubled in Mexico as supplies were constricted. Army soldiers and federal police in Zone VI destroyed 43,915 plots of opium and 14,801 marijuana fields during calendar 1977. They confiscated 192 kilograms of opium, 81 kilograms of heroin, and 6 kilograms of morphine while simultaneously dismantling 20 heroin/morphine laboratories.

Such figures clearly illustrate two facts. First, Condor I was a resounding success by all statistical standards. While granting that statistics are relative indicators, they are nonetheless crucial. The number of opium fields destroyed is particularly important from an American perspective. Second, they vividly depict the contribution of the Sinaloa area to Mexico's overall narcotics problem. Note, for example, the following comparative figures for calendar 1977. Zone VI witnessed the liquidation of 43,915 poppy fields, while the national total was 45,909. The 192 kilograms of confiscated opium dominated the national figure of 226, as did the 20 heroin laboratories dismantled vis-à-vis the grand total of 27.[5] Obviously, when it comes to opium, morphine, and heroin, the triángulo crítico enjoys a monopoly. Or perhaps in the wake of Condor II-IV it would be more accurate to say that it enjoys a changing monopoly.

The phalanx of Mexico's campaña permanente, now in its fifth year, has radically altered both national and international drug scenes and dramatically affected the American heroin and marijuana market. Such has been the incessant, massive application of herbicides that opium and marijuana fields are becoming smaller, widely dispersed, and more difficult to discover. Sinaloa still remains the opium epicenter, but the size of its plots has shrunk to one-tenth acre on the average. More importantly, there are far fewer plots in the state and throughout Mexico. Fields are now being discovered in such heretofore unheard of locales as Querétaro, near Cuernavaca, and in the states of Chiapas and Veracruz. They are smaller in size and far more difficult to

detect.[6] Heroin-processing laboratories are more widely dispersed. Traffickers are wiser and less bold. Some have shifted operations to handling Mexican psychotropics or cocaine being processed in Colombia and shipped through Mexico. Others, like their American counterparts, have retired from the drug business altogether, either voluntarily or as guests of the government in federal prisons. Still others, new faces, have taken their place.

In the aftermath of increased defoliant usage, the imprisonment of several major international traffickers and disruption of their networks, seizures of vast quantities of cocaine in transit, and the removal or imprisonment of corrupt judges and politicians, all but two statistical indicators of an even more intensive Operation CANADOR 1978 declined vis-à-vis 1977.[7] Note, as a case in point, the following comparisons: (1) Opium plots destroyed: 1977 - 45,909, 1978 - 24,190; (2) Marijuana fields eliminated: 1977 - 23,449, 1978 - 9,630; (3) Heroin confiscated: 1977 - 283 kilograms, 1978 - 153 kilograms; (4) Heroin laboratories dismantled: 1977 - 27, 1978 - 22 (Procuraduría, 1979).

Only the hard-core skeptic could discount these figures and even he would concede *the* crucial success indicator of Mexico's program from Washington's viewpoint—its impact on the U.S. drug scene. DEA sources in Mexico City report that the percentage of the American heroin market captured by "Mexican brown" has declined steadily and markedly as follows: 1974 - 85%, 1975 - 74%, 1976 - 60%, 1977 - 53%, 1978 - approximately 50%. In 1976 approximately 7-8 tons of heroin entered the United States. Three years later the amount was estimated at less than 4.5 tons. The retail price of one milligram of pure heroin increased from $1.26 in 1976 to $2.25 in 1979. Purity of Mexican heroin seized at the border dropped from 70% in 1975 to 25% early in 1979. Purity of all retail heroin on American streets declined from 6.6% in 1976 to 3.5% in the second quarter of 1979, a 47% decrease. Finally, deaths resulting from heroin overdose dropped from 1800 in 1976 to a projected 360 during all of 1979, a resounding 80% decrease. And what is true of heroin as a result of Mexico's campaña is even more evident in the case of marijuana.

Even though more marijuana is being smoked in the United States today than was the case in the early 1970s, the Mexican share of that market has shrunk from approximately 90% in 1974 to an estimated 20% with this writing. It would appear the government's use of Paraquat has dramatically reduced Mexican marijuana acreage while severely tarnishing its popularity north of the border. As regards the marijuana "connection," Colombia has undeniably replaced Mexico.[8]

Concluding Observations

Mexico's national campaign against narcotic drugs entered a new phase in the fall of 1975 when the government decided to eradicate opium and marijuana fields with herbicides. One year later Operation Condor became the core of this unparalleled program. Launched in the heart of Mexico's triángulo crítico, Condor has dramatically affected the Mexican and American drug scenes and earned international acclaim for its architects.

Still lacking, however, is an adequate explanation of why Mexican authorities decided to revamp, modernize, and accelerate their antidrug program. Why, in particular, did they opt for the extensive use of herbicides and the massive military presence that has epitomized Operation Condor and the campaign in general since 1975? Unicausal explanations abound, depending on one's source. Individually, none can fully explain the policy change. In combination, they go far in answering the fundamental question: What's in it for Mexico?

First, government officials were embarrassed by the fact that their country had become a major source of heroin. Marijuana is one thing; tons of opium and heroin are something else for a country that has long taken pride in its reputation as a leader in international efforts to contain drug traffic. Not only was Mexico's international image being tarnished, but politicians and laymen alike had become seriously concerned over increased domestic drug use. The use of solvents and glues by poor urban

youth remains the foremost national drug problem. However, marijuana smoking is rapidly growing in popularity in a country that shows no intention of decriminalizing its usage. Opium and heroin addiction, while still in the nascent stages, is increasing, particularly in northern border cities. The potential for greater abuse of marijuana and opium/heroin was obviously enhanced by their massive in-country presence. Apparently convinced that herbicides posed no threat to folk and fauna, a frontal assault against drug cultivation, manufacture, and trafficking was clearly in Mexico's own national interest. The same could be said when it came to pleasing a very important neighbor.

Operation Condor and the entire revitalized campaña are inexorably linked with Mexico-United States relations. Vast quantities of oil notwithstanding, friendly relations with Washington are politically and economically crucial to Mexico City. When Mexico replaced Turkey as the prime source of heroin for the U.S. market in the early 1970s, narcotics became a priority item for American diplomats in Mexico City, who, without exception, see American pressure as the deciding factor in Mexico's 1975 decision to employ defoliant chemicals on a massive scale. Again without exception, these same diplomats are unanimous in praising the program's recent results. Mexico has thus not only pleased the Carter administration with Condor, but it has also acquired another valuable chip in the current diplomatic poker game with Washington.

International imagery, domestic drug problems, and diplomatic pressure are undeniably important in analyzing Mexico's decision to revamp its antidrug program. Individually and collectively, however, they still leave the analyst somewhat puzzled and skeptical. Each existed in varying degrees prior to 1975, yet Mexico, it is contended, did not act until then, primarily because the entire drug production-trafficking phenomenon failed to pose a serious threat to regional stability in the minds of Mexican officials until the mid-1970s. By that time several ingredients combined to produce concerted action from the top: (1) campesino desperation and the resort to drug cultivation and trafficking; (2) arming of the campesino and professional trafficker with weapons often superior to those of local and national

law enforcement officers; (3) open and increasingly violent defiance of law and authority; (4) infusion into the sierras of enormous sums of money from narcotics sales that came to dominate local and regional economies, politicians, judges, and police; and (5) the merging of these trends in areas that have traditionally been the breeding grounds for rural guerrilla movements. Together they posed a threat to the control by the government and the all-pervasive Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) over the entire country from Tijuana to Mérida. Analyzed in combination with U.S. pressure, a tarnished international image, and a burgeoning drug problem at home, the development of a clandestine, well-armed, and very well-financed nexus in the countryside goes far in explaining why Mexican officials launched Operation Condor and why they show no signs of easing their antidrug offensive. On the contrary, their commitment appears stronger than ever. The campaña is, in their own words, permanente!

NOTES

1. Another factor in Mexico's decision may have been, oddly enough, the U.S. government. "I think the Mexicans probably would have started spraying earlier," the author was told early in 1977, "had we not been so persistent in cautioning them about the possible negative effects on other crops. We were really concerned that they not harm other crops and thereby place the whole eradication program in jeopardy" (Interview, 1977).

2. For analysis of these and other possible human rights violations during Operation Condor, see Craig (1979).

3. The per capita income figures, if accurate, are truly astounding. Perhaps it should have read "dollars." If so, *Excelsior* erred twice by also editorializing the figures in pesos.

4. To my knowledge none of the murderers of Martínez Montenegro or his journalistic colleagues has ever been brought to justice. In all likelihood the pistoleros were themselves eliminated. One of them may well have been Culiacán's Chief of Police, Jaime Alcalá García, who was himself ultimately assassinated on December 4, 1978 in Guadalajara.

5. A word of caution is in order concerning these comparative data. The 1977 totals for Condor were given to an *Excelsior* reporter by Carlos Aguilar Garza, the civilian coordinator in Zone VI. The national figures, on the other hand, were provided by the Procuraduría. I have encountered some bewildering problems with Mexican narcotics statistics. For example, *Excelsior* listed six kilograms of confiscated morphine during

Condor 1977, while Procuraduría figures total only three kilograms for the entire national campaign of that year.

6. The shrinking size of opium poppy fields was clearly depicted by an American narcotics officer in Mexico City (Interview, 1979): "There are apparently no sizeable opium plots left out there. Three guys from NASA have been working all over Mexico for three months trying to devise a close-up aerial spotting system for miniplots. They informed us just this morning that the fields are so small that they've been unable to train their computer to understand what a poppy is at close range. It simply hasn't been able to follow the command 'find poppies.' When they finished their report, one of my staff asked somewhat in jest: 'Do you think the American taxpayer is getting his money's worth out of you guys if you spend several weeks down here without being able to statistically verify the existence of any poppies?' Now, my friend, that's what I call a successful campaign."

7. The two exceptions were psychotropics removed from circulation and persons arrested on drug-related charges. The number of stimulants confiscated, for example, was three times larger than the 1977 total.

8. Still unclarified in the game of marijuana statistics, however, is the percentage supplied to American smokers by domestic producers. It may well be (Dowdy, 1979) that the amount is far larger than many government analysts realize.

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Richard Craig is Associate Professor of Political Science at Kent State University. His research on international narcotics traffic in the Americas has resulted in his writing The Bracero Program: Interest Groups in Foreign Policy, *published by the University of Texas Press in 1969, as well as numerous articles.*