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## Only the U.S. Can Win the War on Drugs

By Andrés Rozental and Stanley A. Weiss

Despite a surge of military and police forces across the country, the killings continue – more than 5,000 last year. Some regions are terrorized by a wave of kidnappings, assassinations and beheadings.

Iraq? Afghanistan? Pakistan? Somalia? In fact, the country – which a recent U.S. military study warned could be at risk of "a rapid and sudden collapse" – is none other than Mexico. Two years into President Felipe Calderon's war against the drug cartels, and the cartels' ensuing war with each other, this is a nation at war with itself.

To be sure, the government has had its successes. Huge weapons caches have been seized, large tracts of illegal drug crops have been eradicated and an increasing number of cartel kingpins, couriers and foot soldiers have been put behind bars.

But despite these tactical victories, Mexico's fight – attacking the supply-side of the western hemisphere's drug war – will remain an unwinnable war so long as its northern neighbor fails to attack the demand side: Americans' insatiable appetite for illicit drugs.

When then-President-elect Barack Obama met President Calderon in January, he reaffirmed Washington's support for Mexico's heroic efforts. But he should remember Plan Colombia, which has cost American taxpayers \$8 billion. While Colombian cartels have been weakened, there has been no significant reduction in the amount of cocaine and other drugs shipped out of Colombia, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

So long as the vast American market for cocaine, heroin and other drugs yields irresistible profits, the cartels will continue taking the risks of producing, transporting and distributing the products their customers want. Even with U.S. support for Mexico's fight – \$450 million this year – the cartels will always have more money and guns at their disposal. Even if the U.S.-Mexico border were

improbably sealed, the traffickers would find alternate routes to their American customers.

Mexico's war on supply must be matched, once and for all, by a real American war on demand.

Despite decades of a supposed U.S. "war on drugs" – including some of the harshest penalties for drug use in the world – the percentage of Americans using cocaine, heroin, crack, marijuana and methamphetamines has remained largely steady in recent years, according to the latest National Drug Threat Assessment. Given population growth, the number of users has actually increased to 35 million Americans, including the world's highest use rates of cocaine and marijuana.

So how to achieve major reductions in American demand for illegal drugs, as well as the profitability and criminality it fuels?

Seventy-five years after its repeal, Prohibition remains instructive. Like the 13-year ban on alcohol, the illegality of drugs failed to curb demand. Like the bootleggers and gangsterism of that era, today's drug cartels are simply serving popular demand.

As with the repeal of Prohibition, the U.S. must again follow a common-sense approach by thinking the unthinkable: the gradual legalization of some drugs.

For such a change in strategy, the U.S. must recognize that all drugs are not created equal. It is now clear that marijuana and methamphetamines do not have the same harmful effects as cocaine, heroin, opium and other hard drugs. Discriminating among different drugs – as does the new Massachusetts law decriminalizing possession of less than an ounce of marijuana – points the way toward a more rational approach.

At great cost, in blood and treasure, Mexico is fulfilling its responsibility with a war on supply. It's time the U.S. fulfills its responsibility with a real war on demand.

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