

[Why is the United States backing Mexican drug gangs?](#)

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President Calderón is fighting America's third war, and America's backing his enemies.

By Shannon O'Neil

When President-elect Barack Obama is sworn in next week, he'll become the proud owner of several wars. There is the familiar mayhem in Afghanistan and reluctant optimism in Iraq. And then there is America's forgotten war: the war on drugs. That battle's newest front is its southern neighbor Mexico, whose president, Felipe Calderón, [Obama met on Monday](#). If Calderón speaks his mind, he could put it simply to Obama: We are fighting your war, and you are supplying our enemies -- with demand for their drugs, money for their cartels, and guns for their violence.

Mexico is fighting for its life, and Calderón has ratcheted up the battle since becoming president in 2006. Still, the picture remains grim.

Drug-related violence is spreading throughout Mexico. In 2008, drug-war-related deaths topped 5,600 -- more than the five-year total of U.S. casualties in Iraq. Drug cartels are undermining the state: They infiltrate local and regional governments, corrupt police officers and judicial officials, and threaten and kill independent journalists. Those in public positions often face the ultimate Faustian bargain -- "la plata o el plomo" -- money or death.

The United States has been slow to recognize its responsibility as the main consumer of these illegal drugs. But the U.S. Congress did pass the Merida Initiative last May, increasing security aid to the country's embattled neighbor from a paltry \$40 million to \$400 million a year.

Sounds like real help, right?

Unfortunately, these numbers pale in comparison with the funds the United States supplies to Mexico's bad guys. U.S. drug consumers send at least \$12 billion a year back to Mexico's cartels, and the U.S. government

does little to stop it. Dealers gather individual sales of \$20, \$50, \$100, or more from the streets of New York, Chicago, Charlotte, or Fresno. Through bank transfers, money wiring, and even Greyhound bus, the cash is amassed at the southern border, then put into cars and trucks, and shipped south -- without a glance from U.S. customs officials. This money keeps the cartels in business, funding corruption and violence.

The gun situation is even worse. The Merida Initiative promises some sophisticated gear to the Mexican government, including helicopters, speedboats, and high-end database and surveillance systems. Yet the arms that cartels can and do buy from the open U.S. market -- completely illegally -- leave Mexico's police force and even its military outgunned. There are nearly 7,000 gun shops along the southern U.S. border, about three for every mile. They sell thousands of hand grenades, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, AK-47s, and "cop killer" guns and bullets that cut through Kevlar body armor. The weapons quickly flow south, again with barely a nod from U.S. Border Patrol.

There are many areas where the United States and Mexico can and should work together to improve the situation on both sides of the Rio Grande. For starters, the United States should enforce its own laws. It should investigate and stop money laundering across state lines and international borders. It should enforce arms regulations and stop selling guns to the cartels and their straw buyers. Most of all, it should end the flow of assault rifles and more serious weaponry. In short, instead of just worrying about what is coming north, the United States needs to take a hard look at what is going south.

Obama has indicated his support for the Merida Initiative, as well as the goal of stopping gunrunning. This is a good start. But if the United States really wants to limit the violence in Mexico, it needs to stop funding and arming both sides of the conflict. After all, it's America's war, too.

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