

Ted Galen Carpenter: Review of *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Threat to America*

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Drug-related violence in Mexico is a profoundly important issue for that country and the entire Western hemisphere. Ted Galen Carpenter's new book *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Threat to America* is a thorough and engaging account of the extent and nature of this problem. The purpose of the book is to provide justification and support for Carpenter's preferred policy to manage the war on drugs—legalization of illicit substances by the U.S. government. The book is primarily aimed at a U.S. audience to shape U.S. public opinion on the drug war and illustrate the potential threat to U.S. security.

Carpenter's book is very approachable to readers of all backgrounds. He begins the book by introducing the “cast of characters” in Mexico's drug war (Chapter 1), previous President Felipe Calderón's aggressive campaign to eliminate the cartels by force (Chapters 2 and 6), and the extent and nature of the recent violence (Chapter 3). Carpenter is very critical of Calderón's anti-cartel policies and documents the surge in violence during that campaign. The middle section of the book addresses the politics of the conflict and the logic of the drug trade. Chapter 4 presents the *plata o plomo* (silver or lead) threat facing politicians, security personnel, and judges in Mexico and, perhaps increasingly, officials in the United States. Chapter 5 addresses the frequently expressed concern that Mexico could become a failed state if current violence continues or escalates. The final chapters evaluate the actual and likely effects of drug violence on the United States through corruption of U.S. officials (Chapter 7) and Washington's role in the fight against the cartels (Chapter 8). The final two chapters detail Carpenter's justification for legalization as “defunding the cartels” (Chapter 10) and responses to “scapegoats and bogus solutions.”

The Fire Next Door's central focus is to explain recent drug violence and link it to changes in Mexico's policy under Calderón. The book provides details on high profile killings in recent years, particularly those involving U.S. citizens. Carpenter's writing keeps the reader interested and is careful to present a reasonable view of nuanced issues

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of Mexico's handling of these difficult policy issues. The primary goal of providing details of cartel violence is to convince readers that Calderón's policy to pursue the top cartel leaders using the army has not only proved unsuccessful in its goal but has made the drug war worse by escalating violence without any clear degradation of the cartels or their business. These opinions are widely held but controversial. Carpenter also details the U.S. role in the funding of these policies and providing consistent support for the use of force against the cartels.

The work nicely conveys the complexity of the drug war and it comes at a potentially pivotal time in Mexico's drug cartel policy. With the return of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to the presidency under Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico's may undergo a dramatic shift in strategy away from aggressive pursuit of the top cartel leaders. Peña Nieto has already announced that he will change strategies addressing drug crime and violence against citizens, rather than the top capos. He also intends to change the governmental force that will respond to cartel violence from the military, primarily the army, to a newly formed federal paramilitary gendarmerie. In line with Carpenter, Peña Nieto has recognized that Calderón's policies have made violence worse but he portends a radical change in policy could jeopardize Mexico's U.S. funding (*LA Times*, December 21, 2012).

The legalization argument has a clear and undeniable appeal based on simple economics. The cartels thrive on the profit from drugs made much more expensive because they are illegal. Only lucrative enterprises are worth the extreme efforts made by drug gangs to establish and maintain their business. Carpenter very successfully convinces the reader that the demand is so great for drugs that small interventions or supply chain disruptions cannot eliminate the drug trade. While Carpenter's book is aimed at a broad audience, a more detailed explanation of the economics of drug prohibition would have been welcome. Moreover, Carpenter frequently cites statistics on violence that would have been nicely captured in visuals for the audience to understand violence baselines and see change over time.

As a leading international policy analyst on the drug war, Carpenter sees the U.S. response as critical and legalization of drugs as the only viable solution. Carpenter argues, "the current strategy is not working, and a wide-ranging policy debate in which all options are on the table is long overdue. The fire next door is growing—threatening to engulf our neighbor and endanger us" (p. 17). Recent trends in U.S. public opinion and state-level policy, however limited, in favor of legalization of marijuana might reveal latent support for Carpenter's ideas.

Carpenter quite reasonably recognizes that legalization is unlikely, at least in the short-term, due to political controversy. Given the nature of U.S. political institutions, one can wonder if the dramatic change of legalization is even remotely plausible. The more constructive, if not more satisfying, policy question may be, "given the resistance of our political system and public opinion to bold policy change, what can the United States do to improve the war on drugs?" Carpenter offers few intermediate policy options short of legalization and dismisses most options as "band-aids" or distractions. He may be correct in this assessment but it does not make the policy barriers any less real. Moreover, Carpenter does not provide enough detail on how legalization would work, in practice, or how it has functioned in other contexts, such as Portugal, and downplays real concerns of the effects of legalization.