THE COMBAT OF DRUG TRAFFICKING IN MEXICO UNDER SALINAS: THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE
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Abstract

The combat of drug trafficking in Mexico under the Salinas Administration showed some signs of improvement in terms of the indicators required by the U.S. government to grant certification every year: a) budgetary resources dedicated to fighting drug trafficking; b) seizures of shipments and eradication; c) police and military casualties in the drugs war; d) arrests; e) legal and institutional reforms; f) signing international agreements; and g) acceptance of U.S. collaboration, as well as the presence of DEA agents in Mexican territory. Even when the improvement in these indicators was very evident during the Salinas administration, the degree of final commitment of the Mexican government to fight drugs remains unclear. However, the interest of President Salinas in getting NAFTA approved provoked a reduction in the limits of tolerance to drug trafficking. All this suggests that international interests constitute an important factor to propel governments into a more confrontational approach with the drug trafficking.

Resumen

El combate al narcotráfico en México durante el gobierno de Salinas de Gortari mostró algunos signos de mejora en términos de los indicadores requeridos por el gobierno mexicano para otorgar la certificación anual: a) presupuesto dedicado a combatir el narcotráfico; b) decomisos de cargamentos y erradicación de cultivos; c) bajas de policías y militares en la guerra contra las drogas; d) arrestos; e) reformas legales e institucionales; f) firma de acuerdos internacionales; g) aceptación de la colaboración de Estados Unidos, así como la presencia de agentes de la DEA en territorio mexicano. Aún cuando la mejora en estos indicadores fue muy evidente durante el gobierno de Carlos Salinas, el grado de compromiso final no está claro. Sin embargo, el interés del Presidente Salinas en la aprobación del Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte provocó una reducción en los límites de la tolerancia hacia el narcotráfico. Todo esto sugiere que los intereses internacionales constituyen un factor importante para impulsar a los gobiernos hacia un enfoque más confrontacional hacia el narcotráfico.
The production and traffic of illicit drugs from Mexico to consumer countries, particularly the United States, was not a relevant topic for U.S.-Mexican relations until the 1970’s. “Operation Intercept”, implemented unilaterally by the Nixon Administration in 1969 along the border with Mexico, was a foretaste of what was to come in subsequent years: a cycle of cooperation and conflict around drug control efforts. However, friction between the two countries over this issue was minimal during the 1970’s. In the end, the Mexican government decided to cooperate openly and efficiently in the fight against drug trafficking. “Operation Condor”, implemented in the mid-1970’s, is one of the most successful examples in recent history of anti-drug policies in a developing country.

Nevertheless, during the 1980’s things changed abruptly. The Mexican anti-drug campaign lost vitality, moving first from successful to unsuccessful combat, and then to outright tolerance of the drug trade, probably including the complicity of some Mexican authorities with the traffickers. The nadir of this cycle was likely reached in 1985-1986, when the DEA agent, Enrique Camarena, was assassinated in Guadalajara, Mexico. The Mexican government’s degree of involvement in this assassination is still debated. Whatever its extent, however, the incident suggested that Mexican authorities were moving along a continuum of total combat of drug trafficking-tolerance-complicity. The 1980’s thus show a displacement of Mexican government policy from successful combat to dissimulation and complicity.

The policy of dissimulation generated the most acrimonious relations between Mexico and the United States in the last four decades. The inventory of the forms that conflict assumed during those years is long one. It is important to point out the White House’s growing concern over stability in Mexico during 1985 and 1986. However, conflict decreased in 1987, basically due to a shift in U.S. policy toward Mexico. It seems that after three years of overt pressure, the Reagan Administration realized it was fomenting the opposite of what it wanted: that is, instability and lack of democracy. The “Houston spirit”, deriving from the 1988 meeting in that city between presidents-elect George Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari, paved the way for a newly cordial relationship. In this new era, the issue of drug trafficking became less visible, but certain rules of the game were established: the Mexican government did not have to be very effective in combating drugs, but open complicity with drug traffickers was not allowed. The outcome was a pattern of limited tolerance of drug trafficking that minimized frictions with the United States but which, in the final analysis, could not restrain the influence of drug lords over the Mexican security apparatus. How did this policy of limited tolerance develop itself? What are its effects and limitations? What is the future of Mexico’s policy of narcotics control? These are the questions I will address in this paper. In the following section, the paper presents a model of policy options vis-à-vis drug trafficking in order to discern the limits of the policy of tolerance.
during the Salinas de Gortari Administration. The paper then analyzes the evolution of Salinas’ anti-drugs policy since 1988. A final section offers some conclusions.

I. Policy options in the fight against drugs: to combat or not to combat (To dissimulate or not to dissimulate).

It is hardly a secret that not all countries fight drug trafficking with the same degree of commitment and efficacy. The acknowledgement that U.S. government provides every year, “certifying” some countries that have performed acceptably in the fight against drugs and “decertifying” those that have not, reflects clearly: some countries fight drug trafficking more than others. There are several reasons for this split between a formal acceptance of the international drug regime and its lack of compliance are several. Putting aside those countries that have explicitly rejected the signing of international agreements, the lack of compliance of the accepted rule is related to two dimensions of State: willingness and capability. Both dimensions are influenced by internal and external factors. The U.S. pressure — much more than a diffuse pressure from the “international community” — has been a fundamental factor that explains in a good measure the “war against drugs” carried out by Latin American countries. Nevertheless, there are also internal factors that behave as strong dissuasive of complying with the international rule, such as the economic impact of drug trafficking in countries with weak economies, the financial and political costs of drug fighting, the destabilizing effect of such a combat, and even the economic and political interests which benefit from drug trafficking. The final policy of every state is going to be determined by the interaction of internal and external pressures, for and against the compliance of the accepted rule. The variations in state policy will also be determined by changes in these inputs.

One important aspect to take into account in analyzing the state behavior toward drugs, is the degree of state vulnerability vis-à-vis external factors. The different degree of vulnerability every Latin American country presents can explain why, for example, the United States has exerted more pressure toward militarization in the case of the Andean countries than in the case of Mexico. In this particular example the existence of common interests — and mutual vulnerabilities — between Mexico and the United States has given Mexico a bigger bargaining power than that of South American countries, in the fight against drugs. The case of Burma (Myanmar) would be similar to that of Mexico, but for opposite reasons. Burma is the main opium

producer in the world (around 60% of world total production in 1994), but its degree of integration (in trade and cultural terms) to the West is very low, what makes it very invulnerable to the U.S. pressures, despite the fact that it has been “decertified” several times. Something similar happens with other countries that have been recently decertified, like Iran or Syria.

Among internal factors that determine a bigger or minor compliance we can mention economic weakness and the need for external capitals. The cases of Bolivia and Peru are clear examples of the difficulties that poor countries confront when fighting drug trafficking. At the beginning of the 1990’s, coca trade was a source of employment for 20% of working force, while in Peru it was 15%. With such a structural dependency from cocaine economy, it seems evident that tolerance toward drug trafficking is not only a matter of weakness or corruption of government. The crop-substitution plans have accurately understood the economic dimension of the problem but it appears that the size of the problem is such that cannot be solved with these kind of measures. In the case of Mexico, it has been argued that tolerance toward drug trafficking during the De la Madrid Administration has been motivated by the economic crisis of the 1980s and the need of foreign money to help solving that crisis.

Economic problems a State confronts are not only a powerful dissuasive element in the fight against drug trafficking because of the economic benefits that the drug trade brings but also because it puts limits to the amount of resources that can be devoted to combat drugs. However, the lack of economic resources can also push a State to show a bigger commitment in the drug wars in order to get the aid the United States gives for that purpose. This can lead to a schizophrenic behavior in a country which wants to get U.S. aid (that for some countries, like Bolivia, represents a substantial amount of money) but which, at the same time, does not want to fight drug trafficking to the point of affecting its national economy.

A second factor that influences the degree of commitment in the fight against drugs is the level of institutionalization of the country and the extent of legality. Some authors have mentioned the threat to national security posed by corruption generated by

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2 In terms of trade, for example, commercial exchanges with the industrial countries represented in 1993 around 21% of total Burma trade. International Monetary Fund, “Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook”, 1994, pp. 307-308.
5 Even when there are not reliable analysis on the volume and impact of narco-dollars on Mexican economy, some indirect indicators, like the real exchange rate of the peso, suggest the existence of a high flow of external money that has led to a de facto revaluation of the Mexican currency in 1992 compared to 1983-1985, in part due to the drug money. This phenomenon is also present in the Andean countries which are source of illicit drugs. Pierre Salama, “Macro-économie de la drogue dans les pays andins”, Futuribles, no. 183, March 1994, pp. 43-56.
narco-dollars. However, the argument can also be developed to the contrary: the fact that one country possesses weak institutions allows the flourishing of drug trafficking. In other words, an unaccomplished modernization of the state allows the existence of traditional spaces where drug-related corruption can survive during long periods of time. The problem is especially serious in Latin American countries that are in a process of transition to democracy since drug trafficking can retard modernization and, consequently, diminishes State capacity to fight drug trafficking.

A third factor that affects state anti-drug policies in a fundamental way is instability generated by the fight of drug trafficking (more than trafficking itself). The shifts in Colombia's anti-drug policy, which moves from total confrontation to passive tolerance, with some traits of complicity (like the escape from prison of Pablo Escobar Gaviria in 1992), suggest a reluctance of governments to pay the price of a total war to drug trafficking, such as terrorism or killings of government's officials. A policy of "total war" to drug trafficking is also complicated by the social acceptance of traffickers in some towns.

The problem of how to measure "political will"

I have already mentioned some internal factors that limit the real ability of governments to fight drug trafficking. As we have seen, many of these factors make rational for some governments not fighting frontally drug trafficking. However, there is another dimension of the phenomenon, which is hard to measure: political will. According to the State Department: "At the bottom of the drugs problem lies the topic of governmental corruption and the political will". Obviously, corruption of the security apparatus weakens seriously state political will to fight this phenomenon. However, the existence of such political will is based on the assumption that the formal acceptance of the international regime of combating drug trafficking supposes the real will to comply with it. In this logic, the absence of this will could only be explained by the State weakness vis-à-vis the power of narco-dollars or by a natural tendency to cheat by some governmental officials. However, the objective reasons that I have mentioned leading to a lack of compliance of the regime suggests that we are confronting a declaratory regime, with no real implementation capacity.

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8 "Combined country efforts seen best hope against drugs (Excerpts of INCRS Executive Summary)", LEF 111, April 4, 1994, USIA Summary (mimeo), p. 3.

Notwithstanding, if we assume the functional definition of an international regime as the set of norms, rules and procedures regulating the behavior of States in a specific issue, it seems evident that a “declaratory regime”, not applied in practice, is not such a thing. This functional inexistence of the international drug control regime would explain the heart of the problem of political will which is supposed to exist but which in fact it does not.

Nevertheless, even when political will is not an element given in advance, this will is present in some cases and moments where there exist some objective reasons conducive to it. For example, when drug trafficking is perceived as a direct threat to State’s security, despite the economic benefits that drugs can bring. The question is then how to know if this political will is present or not, how to measure political will. Traditionally, criteria used by governments to show its political will to fight drug trafficking are: a) the budget dedicated to fight drug trafficking; b) seizures of illicit drugs and cultivated fields eradicated; c) police and army casualties in the drugs war; d) number of arrests related to drug crimes; e) institutional and legal reforms aimed to strengthen the fight against drugs; f) signing of international agreements to fight drug trafficking; g) acceptance of international advisory and military and police collaboration from the outside (particularly the United States).

However, almost all these criteria can be falsified and be presented as proof of a real combat of drug trafficking when it is not true. The criterion of budget can be totally irrelevant if the will to fight drug trafficking does not exist before. It is possible to spend huge amounts of money just to project the image that “something” is done against drugs. The second criterion, that of seizures and eradications, even when it can also be falsified, is more reliable since it is usually supervised by U.S. anti-drugs units. Nevertheless, since the figures of drug production are not very reliable, it is difficult to measure the impact of seizures on the total volume of drugs. Regarding the government agents casualties, they reflect more a higher degree of violence in the fight against drugs or a lack of efficacy of the governmental agencies than a will to combat drug trafficking. A higher number of casualties is not necessarily a proof of a higher governmental will to fight the phenomenon, since these casualties can be a result of clashes with minor traffickers or even of clashes among security forces, as happened in the Mexican state of Veracruz when some police agents were killed by members of the Mexican Army which were apparently protecting drug traffickers.

Concerning the criterion of arrests, it can be partially falsified, even by apprehending innocent people accused of being involved in drug trafficking, which generates human rights abuses. However, a most reliable proof of political will in the fight against drugs would be the arrest of the drug lords, what would imply a frontal attack to drug trafficking and the existence of a real intention to destroy the criminal

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10 Everything suggests that seizures do not affect in a significant way the world drug trafficking. See Peter Reuter, Gordon Crawford and Jonathan Cave, Sealing the Borders. The Effects of Increased Military Participation in Drug Interdiction, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1988, 155 pp.
organizations. Paradoxically, it is not a criteria of effectiveness given the fast and mechanic recomposition of cartels’ leadership.

In the case of legal and institutional reforms to strengthen the fight against drugs, they are indeed a necessary requirement for achieving more efficacy in the combat of drug trafficking. However, their implementation depends on the strength of State institutions. As we have pointed out, most of the Latin American countries, present structural weakness that inhibit in an important way the alleged effects of these reforms. It makes that legal reforms are not reliable criteria to measure political will. It is not difficult to suppose that some governments promulgate legal reforms only to improve its image in the eyes of its own public, knowing in advance that effective implementation of law is limited.

Regarding international agreements to fight drug trafficking, it would seem evident, because of their proliferation, that the number of them does not guarantee an effective combat of drugs. At the same time, the signature of them is not necessarily a proof of political will. Obviously, the governmental publicity given to the signature of these agreements wants to reinforce the image of a strong political will. However, as it has been mentioned, the absence of an international authority, capable of enforcing the agreements signed, plus the fact that the volume of drugs traded has remained stable during the recent years, do not allow us to affirm that there exists a working international regime.

Finally, the acceptance of advisory and, eventually, the participation of members of the DEA and the U.S. army in counter-drugs efforts in the territory of Latin American countries producers of narcotics is in fact a proof of the existence of a will to collaborate with the United States in the fight against drugs but not necessarily a proof of a will to engage in a frontal war against the traffic of narcotics. There is no doubt that this acceptance, sometimes reluctantly, is aimed to help in the projection of an image of cooperation. At the same time, the presence of military and police advisors has also contributed to increase the intensity of the fight against drugs in some moments and regions and, therefore, to lessen the U.S. pressure and to facilitate American aid. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see in this measure more than a desire to get an accommodation with Washington.

As we have seen, if political will is a defining element of the degree of combat of drug trafficking, its measurement is specially difficult to achieve, what allows a partial fulfillment of the international rule or dissimulation. In any case, it seems evident that final state behavior against drug trafficking is going to be determined by the whole combination of internal and external factors pushing for or against the combat of the phenomenon. The discussion is not if internal or external factors are more important, but what may be the combination of conditions every country presents—including “objective” conditions like economic model, external vulnerability, and “subjective” ones like government’s perception of its interests and national security. The specific blend of these conditions is going to determine a continuum of postures regarding drug trafficking among which States move. The challenge is to explain why a specific State moves from one point to another inside this continuum.
I present the next table, as an attempt to build a framework to explain the different positions inside this continuum of State positions vis-à-vis drug trafficking. This table does not pretend to be exhaustive, but just one element that contributes to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government policy</th>
<th>Role of drug trafficking</th>
<th>Level of institutionalization</th>
<th>Effect on stability</th>
<th>Effectiveness of combat</th>
<th>External vulnerability</th>
<th>Political will</th>
<th>Support to international regime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open promotion of drug trafficking</td>
<td>Confusion of the role of the trafficker and that of the governor</td>
<td>Null or limited</td>
<td>Null or limited</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Null limited and rhetorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized tolerance: sporadic combat and by convention</td>
<td>Functional differentiation: confusion in the stage of distribution</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited and rhetorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited but committed combat</td>
<td>Differentiated from authority</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Open and committed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized and committed combat</td>
<td>Clearly differentiated from authority</td>
<td>Total legal rationality</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Total and committed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. The anti-narcotics policy of Salinas de Gortari.

The Salinas government received, in the issue of drug trafficking, a legacy of conflicts that has contributed to magnifying the problem in the public eye. The assassination of the DEA agent, Enrique Camarena, in 1985 and the corruption that characterized the De la Madrid government on this issue paved the way for further conflicts, like the kidnapping of Humberto Alvarez Machain in 1990 for his alleged participation in Camarena’s death, or the alleged involvement in that crime of some Salinas’ officers, who were also part of the De la Madrid government. However, as I will see below, the signs of open collusion of the government with drug traffickers were reduced significantly during the Salinas Administration, compared to those which appeared during the De la Madrid’s sexenio. It does not mean that corruption was eliminated,


13 It seems that the feeling in the U.S. government that Mexican authorities were openly colluded with drug traffickers was very strong during the De la Madrid Administration. Jack Lawn, Director of the DEA during the Camarena’s assassination declared in 1992, regarding this incident, that: “The confidence that exists in the international police community, which allow us to operate in other countries and collaborate with our counterparts any place in the world, did not work in the Camarena’s case, because of the corruption of some members of police institutions who were
but that Mexican government understood better the requirements for a better relation with the United States, in the issue of drug trafficking.

During the first four years of his term, Salinas de Gortari tried to improve significantly the indicators of good will, which have been above-mentioned: a) budget dedicated to fight drug trafficking; b) seizures of shipments and eradication; c) police and military casualties in the drugs war; c) number of arrests; d) legal and institutional reforms in order to strengthen the fight against drugs; e) signing of international agreements; and f) acceptance of U.S. collaboration as well as the presence of DEA agents in Mexican territory.

In terms of the budget, money dedicated to fight drug trafficking have increased, in absolute and relative terms, since the mid-1970’s. In 1977 the budget of the anti-drug campaign was 211 million pesos, amounting to 29.8% of total Attorney-General’s Office (PGR) expenditures. In 1991 the amount of money dedicated to fight drug trafficking was 354,180 million pesos (about US $100 million). Regarding seizures and eradication, there is a slight tendency to grow during the recent years (see table), up to the point that Attorney-General Jorge Carpizo, stated in July 1993, that Mexico occupied the first place in seizures in Latin America. Regarding arrests, they have increased substantially: during the Salinas’ sexenio there have been more than 100,000 persons arrested, compared to about 52,000 arrests during the De la Madrid government. In this regard it has to be mentioned that the Mexican government reported the arrest of 12 “big bosses”, like Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, who was arrested in 1989. It is also worth mentioning that as a result of an incident in which some anti-drug policemen were shot by members of the Mexican Army (apparently to protect drug traffickers), in November 1991 in Tlaxcoiyan, Veracruz, two military officers were arrested (one of them a General). The answer of the Salinas government can be seen as a result of international pressures once the information about this incident reached the media. However, it was the first time in years that Mexican government arrested a high military officer for his involvement in drug trafficking.


Data taken from Guadalupe González, “Los límites internos...”, Op. Cit. These figures do not take into account inflation, which was particularly high during the 1980’s.


From 1989 to 1994, the total of persons arrested was 103,414. For this data see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, April 1994, p. 163, and April 1995, p. 147. see also Amparo trejo, “Reconoce Gobierno infiltración de narcos”, Reforma, November 30, 1994, p. 1. During the De la Madrid period, the exact amount of arrests is 52,711. For this data, see Guadalupe González, Op. Cit.

Regarding the casualties of policemen in charge of the fight against drug trafficking, the number was 150 by 1993.¹⁹

In the issue of legal and institutional reforms, the Salinas government was very active after the Cardinal Posadas assassination on May 24, 1993, in the city of Guadalajara. A month later, on June 17, it was created the National Institute for the Combat of Drugs, which wanted to establish a bigger coordination of the fight against drug trafficking. Also, on December 1993 the Criminal Code was reformed in order to increase the length of sentences for drug traffickers and the number of days they can be maintained in custody. These reforms also wanted to facilitate the confiscation and sale of goods belonging to drug traffickers and the authority’s access to information about drug trafficking.²⁰ On July 1993, the Mexican government also modified the Federal Fiscal Code establishing the requirement of notifying the entry of foreign exchange into Mexican territory in amounts of more than US $10,000. Besides, since 1990 money laundering was defined as a felony.²¹

Concerning international collaboration, the Salinas Administration showed a notorious will to maintain and increase agreements in the fighting of drug trafficking. Actually, there is an important tradition of supporting international agreements in universal and regional fora. Mexico signed the Single Convention of 1961 and the Vienna Convention of 1988. However, the collaboration with the United States has been more problematic. Certainly, U.S. anti-narcotics forces have operated in Mexico since the 1960’s,²² but this has been a conflictive issue. In 1992, as a reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court decision authorizing kidnapping in foreign territory of persons prosecuted by American justice, the Mexican government implemented a bill to regulate the “temporary stay of agents representing foreign governments offices that are in their country in charge of police, inspection or surveillance functions in law enforcement, as well as specialized technicians”.²³ Also, as a protest against the U.S. Supreme Court decision, the Salinas government rejected the financial assistance channeled by Washington through the International Narcotics Control Program.²⁴

Nevertheless, there are some projects of collaboration with the United States as the Northern Border Response Force, created in 1990, also known in Spanish as “Operación Halcón”. This mechanism was evaluated in a non-satisfactory way in a

²¹Ibid., See also “Apoyará la SHCP a Autoridades en Casos de Narcotráfico”, El Financiero, June 16, 1993, p. 38.
General Accounting Office Report of U.S. government, on May 1993. However, it was reported in the 1994 and 1995 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, released by the U.S. Department of State, as the “centerpiece” of U.S.-Mexican law enforcement cooperation and the “focus of bilateral interdiction efforts”. The interest in collaborating with the United States moved Mexican government to increase its involvement in anti-narcotics operations in Central America. It seems that collaboration with Central America was fruitful in the case of the arrest of drug trafficker Joaquin “Chapo” Guzman, apparently in Guatemala. This arrest was possible thanks to the Hemispheric System of Information.

**NAFTA and drug trafficking**

As it has been shown, the Salinas Administration understood very well the need to improve the indicators of the will to fight drug trafficking. It is highly probable that the interest in improving indicators was due to the U.S. pressures in a context characterized by a growing external vulnerability of the country. This vulnerability has to be analyzed in the light of the North American Free Trade Agreement negotiations. Actually, during the months previous to the NAFTA approval in the U.S. Congress on November 1993, speculations arose about an increase in drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States, thanks to the increase in trade between both countries. A declassified memorandum from the Defense Intelligence Agency Joint Staff, in Washington, D.C. confirms the perception that the Salinas government was particularly concerned about the impact of the drug issue on NAFTA negotiations. According to this document, written in December 1992, Salinas’ cooperation with the United States on drug matters “reflects in part President Salinas’s hope that paying more attention to drug issues will minimize frictions with

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26 Víctor Chávez Angeles, “Grupo Especializado Capturó al ‘Chapo’”, *El Financiero*, June 12, 1993, p. 9. However, some journalistic sources suggested that “Chapo” Guzman was not really captured in Guatemala. It was even mentioned that the drug trafficker was arrested in a ranch, in the state of Chiapas, property of the former Deputy Attorney-General in charge of the combat of drug trafficking, Javier Coello Trejo. See Carlos Acosta and Francisco López Vargas, “Más dudas, ahora sobre la versión oficial del arresto de Guzmán Loera”, *Proceso*, No. 867, June 14, 1993, pp. 6-7; Ulises Hernández, “Dudas y Confusiones en Guatemala”, *El Financiero*, June 12, 1993, p. 9.
the United States that could jeopardize Mexico’s economic recovery, his top
domestic priority". This memorandum linked directly the approval of NAFTA to
Mexico’s counter-drugs policies: “As such, NAFTA’s pending approval probably
will continue somewhat to influence President Salinas’s policy decisions on drug
issues vis-a-vis the United States”. A complementary interpretation of this
perspective was suggested by The New York Times, which stated that Bush and
Clinton Administrations exaggerated Mexican success in the fight against drugs in
order to protect NAFTA negotiations.

However, it is feasible to speculate that the Salinas’s will to improve the
indicators of the fight of drug trafficking had also an impact in the degree of conflict
with drug traffickers. In other words, it is very possible that the combat of drug
trafficking increased in real terms, and not only in appearance. It could have been
provoked by U.S. pressures since although the indicators of political will are easy to
falsify, a certain commitment in the fight of illicit drugs was necessary to improve the
Mexican image in the United States. Notwithstanding, a real increase in the combat of
drugs could also have been provoked by a fear of Mexican government that drug
trafficking began to be “out of control”.

Although the hypothesis of a growing concern about the influence of drug
trafficking in Mexican government is difficult to prove, there are some indications that
support this explanation. Probably induced by the U.S. pressures in the light of NAFTA
negotiations, the appointment of Jorge Carpizo as Attorney-General in January 1993
was also a signal of a more confrontational approach toward drug trafficking. After his
arrival, Carpizo denounced that drug trafficking was penetrating the media. He also
complained about drug related corruption in his office and said he was “surrounded by
traitors”.

However, one decisive event in the radicalization of the drug wars was the
assassination of Cardinal Posadas in the city of Guadalajara, on May 1993. It is
difficult to know if this crime was a product of a more confrontational policy toward
drug trafficking or the detonator of it. The fact is that President Salinas declared total
war to drug trafficking four days after the Cardinal’s death, and made the legal
reforms that have been mentioned above. This declaration of war was accompanied by

(mimeo). According to Jorge G. Castañeda, it is possible that drug traffickers have concluded since
mid-1991 that Salinas’s government decided to break the implicit agreements with the drug lords,
because of U.S. pressure. See Jorge G. Castañeda, Sorpresas te da la vida. México 1994, Mexico:
31Two articles related to drug trafficking in Mexico appeared in The New York Times on
July 30 and 31, 1995. See “Bush y Clinton han exagerado los éxitos de México contra el narcotráfico,
asegura el NYT”, La Jornada, August 1, 1995, pp. 1 and 8.
32Héctor A. González, “El Poder del Narcotráfico entra en los Medios de Comunicación:
33“Reconoce Infiltraciones de Narcos en la PGR y se Queja de Campañas en Contra. ‘Si no
Sirvo a México me voy’, Advirtió Carpizo”, El Financiero, June 8, 1993, p. 36.
34“Defiende Salinas en EU su Política Laboral y Ecológica”, El Financiero, May 29, 1993,
p. 4.
an ultimatum to police forces in charge of the combat of drug trafficking, made by the Deputy Attorney General, Mario Ruiz Massieu, by mid-1994 and by the statement of the former Attorney-General, Diego Valadés, that it was “alarming” the number of policemen addicted to drugs which by firing them, “we are giving them to the big mafias of drug trafficking”. Probably one factor that reinforced the Salinas’s perception of drug trafficking as a threat was the Chiapas uprising in January 1994, even when there are no indications of a linkage between drug trafficking and the guerrilla “zapatista”. Notwithstanding, it sounds logical that in a moment of political crisis, like at the beginning of 1994, a tight control over the security forces was a high priority of the Mexican State.

An alarming voice was also raised on May 1994 by the Archbishop of Guadalajara (who replaced Cardinal Posadas), Juan Sandoval Iñiguez, who stated that 40% of Attorney-General’s office personnel was “committed” to drug trafficking, what explained why it was not possible to clarify the Posadas’s death.

**Salinas’ commitment to fight drug trafficking**

However, despite the fact that it is possible to detect a bigger concern of the Salinas Administration about the impact of drug trafficking in Mexican institutions, it is difficult to know how deep was the commitment to fight drug trafficking. Actually, there are some factors that put into serious doubt this will. First, Some of the attempts of Attorney-General Jorge Carpizo to attack drug trafficking were aborted, like the menace of publishing a list of narco-journalists which ended in nothing. This suggests that probably Carpizo was touching sensitive points of the political system and he had not enough support from the Salinas Administration to proceed further. Second, One of the most important implementers of this war to drug trafficking, the Deputy Attorney-General, Mario Ruiz Massieu, was apparently involved himself in drug trafficking, according to the Zedillo Administration. Third. There are some signals that close collaborators of Salinas could also have been related to drug trafficking. At the end of the Salinas’s term, Eduardo Valle, a former Advisor of Attorney-General, Jorge Carpizo, accused the Salinas’s Minister of Communications, Emilio Gamboa of having relations with drug traffickers. Some journalistic sources have also mentioned Salinas’s Chief of Staff, José Córdoba, as one suspect of having links with drug trafficking. Even when these accusations have not been proved, there are clear

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indications of a friendship between José Córdoba and a supposed member of the Gulf Cartel. Also, a U.S. magazine denounced the friendship of the President Salinas’s brother, Raúl Salinas (who has been arrested accused of killing former PRI Secretary-General, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu), with Juan García Abrego, leader of the Gulf Cartel.

40Carlos Marín, “Exlocutora de Televisa, exagente federal, contacto de jefes narcos, confidente de José Córdoba... Marcela Bodenstedt y sus misterios”, Proceso, No. 968, May 22, 1995, pp. 6-13. In an amazing statement, President Zedillo said on July, 1995 that the friendship of José Córdoba with Marcela Bodenstedt—the supposed contact of the Gulf Cartel—involved a “fault” that Córdoba “has to examine with his wife and that will require the pardon of his wife”. “Texto íntegro de la conferencia de prensa del presidente Zedillo”, Unomásuno, July 5, 1995, p. III.

**Conclusions**

It is difficult to establish in a clear way the degree of transition of Mexican policy toward drug trafficking along the continuum that goes from open promotion of drug trafficking to generalized and committed combat. However, it is possible to identify a shift toward a more confrontational approach to drug trafficking. The reasons for this change are both external and internal. On the one hand, the U.S. pressure to increase the commitment in the fight against drugs was a decisive factor in the light of NAFTA negotiations and the increasing Mexico’s vulnerability provided by interdependence. However, it does not seem to be the only factor. As it has been mentioned, there are some indications that the Mexican government began to be worried about the destabilizing effect of drug trafficking after the Cardinal Posadas’s assassination. It is also very possible that this concern increased after the Zapatista uprising on January 1994.

Notwithstanding, it remains unclear of the degree of political will of Salinas Administration, especially if some close collaborators of him (and a relative) could have been involved in drug trafficking. An alternative explanation suggests that Salinas was concerned about the “loss of control” of the security forces, because of the corruption generated by drug trafficking —and aware of the importance of improving Mexico’s image in the United States—— but he was also conscious about the limitations for the development of a “total war” to drug trafficking.

In any case, if the speculations about the incredible high degree of involvement in drug trafficking of the Mexican police forces are at least partially true —as it has been recognized by the Zedillo’s government—— the Mexican state is confronting a tremendous challenge. By threatening legality and institutions, drug trafficking is not only threatening Mexican State —which could be a sign of our times—— but it is also threatening the Mexican transition to democracy. If President Zedillo is committed to carry out this transition, it seems evident that drug lords present one of the most serious obstacles.

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42Zedillo stated in an interview that “There is evidence that some individuals in the government may have served the narcotraffickers’ interests”. Geri Smith, "They didn’t elect me to have a pleasant time", *Business Week*, April 3, 1995, p. 67.
MEXICO. ILLEGAL DRUGS SEIZURES (1989-1994)

(Metric Tons)

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