

The Spectacle of Drug Violence: American Public Discourse, Media, and Border Enforcement in the Texas-Tamaulipas Border Region During Drug-War Times

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ABSTRACT

This article explains how mass media and U.S. political rhetoric have created a “spectacle” of border violence as an offshoot of Mexico’s drug war. The study shows how some U.S. politicians and government officials have promoted their political agendas by communicating an alarmist view of the drug war within Mexico that includes a spillover of violence into the United States and narco-terrorism, which allegedly represent enormous risks to U.S. national security. The creation of this spectacle has had a real impact on specific policy areas, particularly on border security and immigration. This analysis focuses mainly on the Texas-Tamaulipas border region.

Key words: drug violence, Texas-Tamaulipas border, American public discourse, mass media, spectacle, spillover violence, narco-terrorism, border security, U.S. immigration policy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explica cómo los medios masivos de comunicación y la retórica política en Estados Unidos han creado un “espectáculo” de la violencia fronteriza como resultado de la guerra contra las drogas que libra México. El estudio muestra cómo algunos políticos y funcionarios del gobierno han promovido sus agendas políticas presentando una visión alarmista de la guerra contra las drogas en México, que incluye el desborde de la violencia hacia Estados Unidos y el narcoterrorismo lo cual, aseguran, representa enormes riesgos para la seguridad nacional del país vecino. La creación de este espectáculo ha tenido un impacto real sobre áreas específicas de las políticas públicas, en particular en la seguridad fronteriza y la inmigración. Este análisis se enfoca principalmente en la región fronteriza Texas-Tamaulipas.

Palabras clave: narcoviolenencia, frontera Texas-Tamaulipas, discurso público estadounidense, medios masivos de comunicación, espectáculo, violencia desbordada, narcoterrorismo, seguridad fronteriza, política migratoria estadounidense.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence in Mexico has reached unparalleled levels, particularly since the launch of military operations against drug trafficking organizations (DTOS) in December 2006 by President Felipe Calderón. The president's so-called "war on drugs" claimed 45 515 lives from the beginning of his administration until September 2011, according to official estimates.¹ Extreme levels of drug-related violence have affected several regions of Mexico, particularly border states such as Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. This has stoked concern among U.S. Americans about plausible threats to U.S. national security. Inflammatory statements by U.S. officials and politicians and sensationalist media coverage have heightened these concerns, generating fear in the population by suggesting that extreme drug violence in Mexico could soon spill across the border. The idea that a terrorist attack might come from the United States' southern border and that there are links between Islamic terrorists and Mexican DTOS make up an important part of this new perception of Mexico.

Some stories in the U.S. media as well as some U.S. government statements regarding drug violence in Mexico can be exaggerated or inaccurate. They are often used by politicians to promote policy positions and to obtain funding to further their agendas. The result has frequently been tighter border enforcement, and at times mismanagement of the border, with a negative impact on Mexico-U.S. relations and on U.S. national security, particularly in the areas of border security and immigration. In recent years, some U.S. state governments have passed –or attempted to pass– draconian immigration laws and tried to deploy the National Guard and even U.S. army troops to the border. These types of responses are misguided and have damaged the relationship between the United States and Mexico.

No doubt, the problem of violence and insecurity in Mexico has reached unprecedented levels. In fact, drug violence in Mexico has increased exponentially since the year 2006, when the Mexican president declared a "war on drugs" and sent federal forces, including the military, to fight drug gangs. It is also true that this strategy does not seem to be working, and rather than the conditions being ameliorated, they seem to be worsening. Some analysts even claim that Mexico is fast becoming a "failed state." Nevertheless, it is not clear that the threats to the United States from Mexico's violence are of the magnitude that U.S. media, politicians, and officials have sometimes alleged.

¹ This figure was released January 12, 2012, by the Office of the Mexican Attorney General (PGR) (Herrera, 2012). Alternative sources report that Mexico's war on drugs has claimed over 60 000 lives. For example, *Semanario Zeta* magazine estimated a total of 60 420 drug-related murders during the first five years of President Calderón's administration (Mendoza, 2011).

The present work identifies a “spectacle” of border violence created by U.S. American public discourse and the mass media during Mexico’s drug-war times. This notion builds on French theorist Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Kellner’s (2003a) extensions of the “spectacle,” foregrounding the spectacle that distorts reality related to U.S. border security, thus promoting tighter border enforcement and, at times, border mismanagement. The present study focuses mainly on the Texas-Tamaulipas border region.

The first part of this article explains the exponential escalation of drug-related violence in Mexico during drug-war times, as well as the situation observed in the southern part of the Texas-Tamaulipas border area. The following section presents an analysis of U.S. American public discourse and the use of the mass media to generate a spectacle of Mexico’s war on drugs. The analysis of media content focuses primarily on web-based press releases and print media,² analyzing how U.S. politicians, officials, and the media communicate the allegedly enormous threats to U.S. national security from illegal immigration, spillover violence, and narco-terrorism. Finally, the article discusses the impact of these phenomena on border management and U.S. border policies, essentially border enforcement and immigration policy.

MEXICO’S DRUG-RELATED VIOLENCE TODAY

The “War on Drugs” and the Escalation of Violence in Mexico

The political panorama in Mexico has changed substantially since President Felipe Calderón took office December 1, 2006, and declared a “war on drugs.” Since then, the drug-related violence in Mexico has significantly worsened. Aside from a huge spike in the number of drug-related killings, there has been an explosion in the use of barbaric torture and killing techniques, such as dismemberment, decapitation, or the complete dissolution of human remains, with the aim of terrorizing the population, authorities, and rival drug trafficking organizations.

As a result of the drug war, corruption of government officials at all levels also appears to have increased. Meanwhile, the Mexican state has failed to subdue criminal organizations. It has lost its “monopoly of violence” as well as its monopoly on the power to tax, as witnessed by the rise of widespread extortion of businesses, entrepreneurs, and society in general. Mexico has also witnessed the emergence of a new domestic drug market that provides affordable doses of any type of drug to Mexican

² It is alleged here that the analysis of these two kinds of media coverage capture quite well the basic information presented by other media sources, such as TV, radio, and other types of social media.

consumers. The rise of local markets has been accompanied by the use of unconventional terror tactics such as car bombs, mass kidnappings, grenade attacks, blockades of major avenues and highways, and execution-style murders of public officials.

The president's so-called "war on drugs" claimed 45 515 lives from the beginning of his administration until September 2011, according to official estimates. The number of drug-related murders has increased significantly every year since the policy began (see Table 1). Official reports show a total of 2 826 assassinations in 2007, 9 614 in 2009, and 15 273 in 2010. Patterns of violence and geographical distribution of conflicts in the country have also changed in recent years. Violence tended to concentrate on Mexico's northwestern border regions, especially Chihuahua, as well as in Pacific states like Sinaloa, Michoacán, and Guerrero. Ciudad Juárez is the city that registered the highest number of homicides during the first four years of Calderón's administration –in 2010, approximately 3 100 people were killed in this border city. Now violence has spread to other regions of Mexico and has particularly increased in the states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, all border states. In 2010, half of the drug-related murders in Mexico took place in just three states: Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas.

Table 1						
DRUG-RELATED MURDERS (2006-2010)						
	2006 (only December)	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
Tamaulipas	0	80	96	90	1 209	1 475
Mexico (total)	62	2 826	6 837	9 614	15 273	34 612

Source: Oficina de la Presidencia, 2010.

DRUG-RELATED VIOLENCE IN NORTHEASTERN MEXICO

The case of Tamaulipas

The Texas-Tamaulipas border is a strategic region in terms of trade, migration, and drug trafficking. The Mexican state of Tamaulipas is a key point for drug distribution to the United States.³ It is also a major route for arms trafficking from the United States to Mexico and other Latin American countries as well as human trafficking from

³ Compared to other border and coastal states, Tamaulipas's border cities are the closest destinations (and, therefore, the safest ones) for drug traffickers who operate in the ports of Quintana Roo, Yucatan, and the Gulf of Mexico, as well as in the most important ports of the Mexican Pacific between Puerto Madero and San Blas (Guerrero, 2010: paragraph 1).

Central and South America to the United States. This is due to Tamaulipas's long border with the U.S. and its extensive sea coast (see Figure 1); what is more, Tamaulipas has 17 international bridges to the U.S. between Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros on the Gulf Coast, more than any other Mexican state.

Violence in Tamaulipas has increased drastically in the past couple of years, particularly since January 25, 2010, with the definitive rupture between the main organized crime groups operating in the state: the Gulf Cartel and its former enforcers, the heavily-armed Zetas. In 2009, Mexico's federal government reported 90 drug-related murders in Tamaulipas. That number jumped more than 10-fold in just one year to 1 209 in 2010 (see Table 1). Spectacular, violent drug-related incidents in Tamaulipas such as grisly massacres and battles between government forces and drug gangs have become a staple in Mexican as well as international media. The year 2010, in particular, was scarred by a massive number of drug-related execution-style murders of gunmen, federal police, soldiers, civilians, and even high level political figures, such as gubernatorial candidate Rodolfo Torre-Cantú, considered a shoo-in the election, who was gunned down along with his bodyguards on a main road leading to the state capital Victoria's airport. No one has been arrested for his murder.

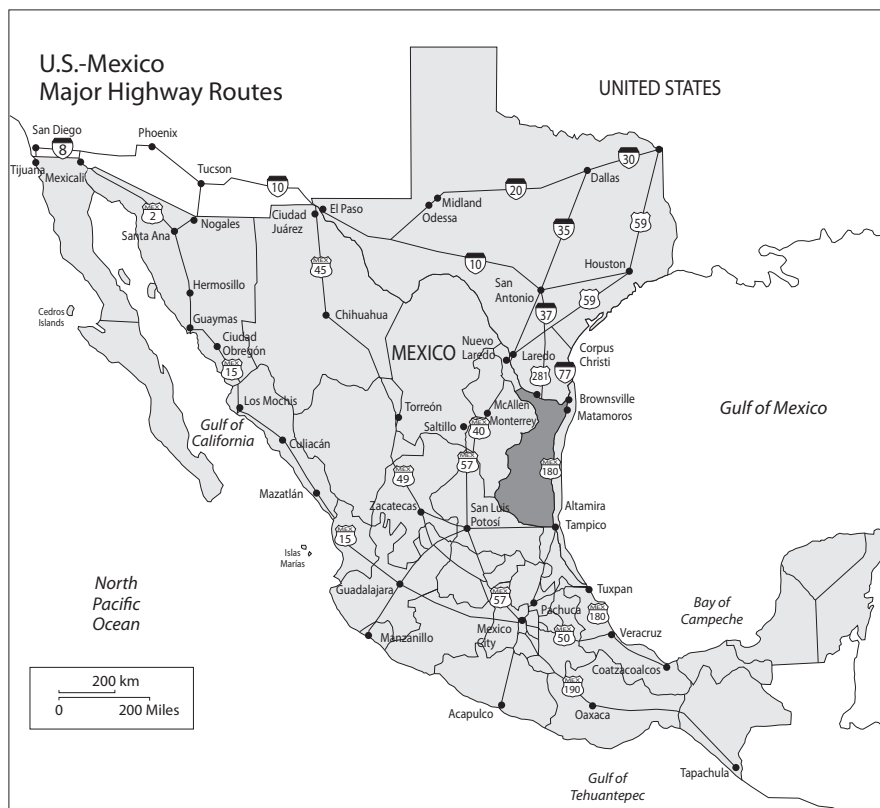
A number of factors have contributed to the growing violence in northern Mexico. These include the failure of the *maquiladora* industry to fulfill the promises of an adequate source of income for the local population and the corruption of local and state police forces and other institutions by powerful, wealthy drug cartels, as well as the deadly splits between the main DTOS operating in the area. But three key factors are driving the new wave of violence in Tamaulipas. These are 1) the para-militarization of the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, the two main organized crime groups operating in the state; 2) the definitive rupture between these organizations; and, 3) endemic corruption in Mexico's "new democratic" times since the long-time ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost its 71-year hold on the presidency in 2000. The new configuration of the Mexican political system as a result of the democratization process, combined with high levels of corruption and weak local and federal political institutions, have had a major impact on the extreme levels of violence observed in this northern Mexican state.

THE SPECTACLE OF DRUG VIOLENCE IN MEXICO'S DRUG-WAR TIMES

The Media Spectacle, Drug Violence in Mexico, and the Spillover Effect

The subtle but profound ways in which the media influence and manipulate public opinion are well known (Parenti, 1982). In this regard, Leo R. Chavez (2001) suggests that media images not only reflect the national mood, but also play a powerful role

Figure 1
THE TEXAS-TAMAULIPAS BORDER

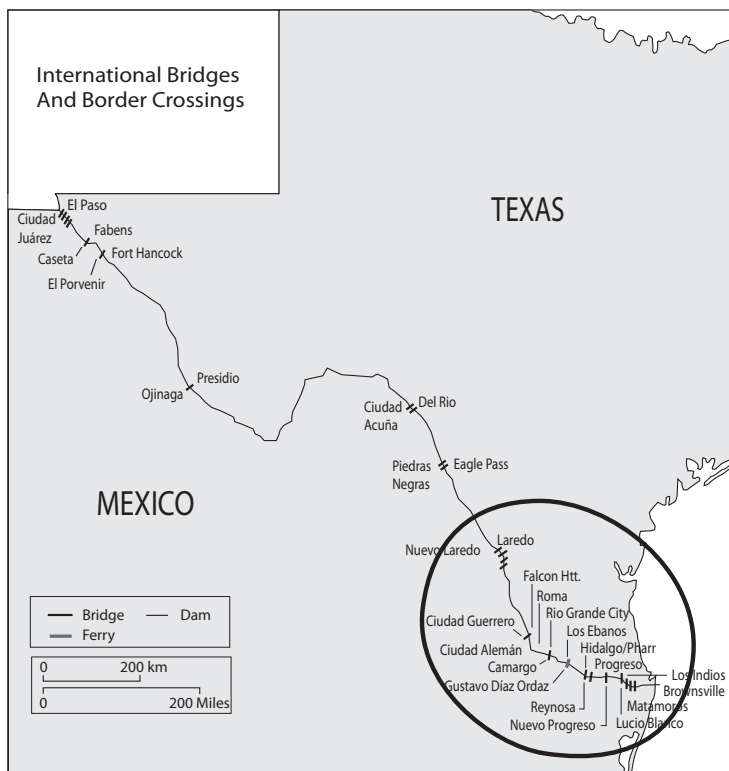


Source: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts and Texas Department of Transportation, 2001.

in shaping national discourse. At the same time, media images influence the creation of social identities (Coutin and Chock, 1996) and public policy design, as well as social, economic, and political relations.

The present work utilizes the concept of “media spectacle” to explain the current state of U.S.-Mexico border relations in the times of Mexico’s drug war. The basic notion of media spectacle is taken from Douglas Kellner’s work, and builds on French theorist Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Kellner defines media spectacle as a series of “phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution” (2003a: 2). According to Kellner, “the mainstream corporate media today in the United States process

Figure 1
THE TEXAS-TAMAULIPAS BORDER
(continuation)



Source: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts and Texas Department of Transportation, 2001.

events, news, and information in the form of media spectacle,” that is, by “technologically mediated events, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form” (2008: 1).

Kellner recognizes that “the corporate media [in the U.S.] has been exploiting fear for decades in their excessive presentation of murder and violence and dramatization of a wide range of threats from foreign enemies and within everyday life” (2003b: 91). This tendency has intensified since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The perception of the existence of a continuing terrorist threat after these events, and the incorporation of this idea into U.S. American public discourse –and as a staple for mass media, both as news and entertainment– have created a media spectacle and stirred up significant levels of fear among the U.S. population.

Nowadays, in the United States, the idea of a terrorist strike from the south has combined with the unprecedented levels of drug violence in Mexico and the perception that this violence could soon spill across the U.S.-Mexico border. This mix has become what Kellner (2008) conceives as a media spectacle. And this media spectacle is fed by exaggerated –and frequently inaccurate– statements about the situation in Mexico. In this context, the phrases utilized by some journalists, politicians, and analysts, and presented by U.S. mass media cause fear among the population; and some of the relevant concerns are sometimes unfounded.

A good example is this recent statement made by George W. Grayson, a professor of government at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia: “The Zetas are trying to recruit [migrants] to become part of the Zetas organization and if they resist or if they look cross-eyed on the Zetas’ commander, they are likely to wind up in a grave” (*Brownsville Herald*, 2011: paragraph 18). Grayson’s assertion is exaggerated and inaccurate. He suggests, without providing enough evidence or background information, that migrants are being kidnapped throughout the country. To say that the kidnappings and mass assassination of migrants are being perpetrated only by the Zetas is an oversimplification of the problem; other groups are also involved, and control different areas of the country. Moreover, the claim that this phenomenon is occurring nationwide is misguided.

The problem is indeed serious, but more information needs to be provided to make an accurate assessment of the situation. When talking about the Zetas, we need more analysis and fewer exaggerated assertions that quickly become part of the media spectacle. It does not seem useful, for example, to refer to the Zetas as Grayson does, that is, as a “bloodthirsty sadistic organization” that serves the “lowest rungs of hell” (*Brownsville Herald*, 2011: paragraph 19). Instead, we would need to further explain the Zetas’ practices, motivations, and origins, as well as their impact on the current situation of extreme drug violence in Mexico.

The problem of drug violence and insecurity in Mexico has reached alarming levels; however, the Mexican government’s strategy to fight this does not seem to be working. That Mexico is becoming a “failed state,” or that certain states –such as Tamaulipas– are “falling into anarchy” is a common theme reiterated in respectable periodicals. According to Nicholas Casey and José de Córdoba of *the Wall Street Journal*, for example, “Some parts of Mexico are caught in the grip of violence so profound that government seems almost beside the point” (2010: paragraph 6). This is particularly true in the northern cities of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Torreón, Coahuila; Ciudad Mier and San Fernando, Tamaulipas; and even Monterrey, the capital city of the rich state of Nuevo León.

The case of Tamaulipas, and especially of its border region with Texas, is emblematic. The assassination of 72 migrants in the municipality of San Fernando in

August 2010 and the discovery of more than 200 bodies buried in the same area in April 2011 demonstrate, according to Melissa del Bosque of *the Texas Observer*, “how little control the federal government exerts over Tamaulipas.” According to Del Bosque, “The cartels have now moved beyond drug violence to murdering . . . civilians, and the government seems incapable of stopping it” (2011b: paragraph 11).

These unprecedented levels of violence in Mexico and the incapacity of Mexican authorities to control the situation notwithstanding, we are not so sure of the breadth and depth of the serious threats of violence that the United States claim, and the media and some politicians in this country have alleged. The argument here does not have to do with the consequences of this critical problem for Mexico. What matters in this case are the negative effects that the Mexican drug war and related violence could have on the United States. Recently, for example, two retired army generals, Barry R. McCaffrey and Robert H. Scales, produced a report titled “Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment,” which concluded that the Texas side of the border had become a “war zone” as a result of the drug problem in Mexico (2011).

So-called “spillover violence” is an important concern for U.S. citizens. But so far, it has been negligible, as the vast majority of drug-related violence has stayed on the Mexican side of the border. The best example of this is the contrast between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico’s most dangerous city, and its sister city just across the border, El Paso. There is indeed some evidence of drug-related shootings, kidnappings, and even assassinations in some U.S. cities and towns, especially in those located in the border area. But these events are quite infrequent, and their impact has been very limited. As of today, spillover violence is still hardly noticeable. In this regard, Professor Tony Payan, comments, “We have the occasional incident; it is a very tiny fraction compared to what is going on the other side of the border” (Ybarra, 2011: paragraph 23).

Nonetheless, U.S. Americans are still concerned about the phenomenon—one that barely exists. Concern about this almost non-existent situation is driven by the alarming and exaggerated statements made by some U.S. officials who present a spectacular view of how drug violence in Mexico is allegedly spiraling out of control and is an imminent threat to U.S. national security. Some top-level U.S. government officials like Under Secretary of the Army Joseph W. Westphal and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have suggested the presence of a “narco-insurgency” in Mexico. In September 2010, Clinton stated that the use of car bombs made Mexico’s drug violence seem like the violence suffered by Colombia 20 years ago. “Drug violence in Mexico bears the mark of an insurgency,” Clinton concluded (Stevenson, 2010: paragraph 1).

PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON DRUG VIOLENCE AND NARCO-TERRORISM

The risks of a narco-insurgency and drug violence creeping over the border from Mexico have led many influential officials and analysts in the U.S. to debate the need of further strengthening border security. Such a perceived necessity has been also linked to the idea of a plausible terrorist threat coming from the southern border. For instance, a top adviser to President Barack Obama alleged that “terrorists seeking to unleash havoc in the United States could use Texas’ porous border with Mexico to enter this country.” At the same time, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper argued that this possibility represents a “significant threat” to the U.S. (Aguilar, 2011a: paragraphs 1-2).

U.S. politicians and media outlets have even been making comparisons between Mexican drug traffickers and the deadliest Middle Eastern and Jihadist terrorists. In the southern part of the Texas-Tamaulipas border region, for example, the recent assassinations, beheadings, and bombings carried out by DÍOS “are drawing comparisons to murders by Muslim extremists” (Aguilar, 2010: paragraph 1). This idea has become part of the media spectacle of drug violence in Mexico. Vincent Perez, a spokesman for U.S. Representative Silvestre Reyes (D-El Paso), a former Border Patrol sector chief and previous chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, alleges that drug cartels “frequently engage in brutal acts of narco-terrorism to undermine democratic institutions and the rule of law, and to incite fear among the people and law enforcement” (Aguilar, 2010: paragraph 9). Therefore, according to Reyes, the United States should do what it has done essentially in Pakistan, “and that is start taking out the heads of the cartels” (Del Bosque, 2011a: paragraph 2).

The spectacular way that media, public figures, and politicians have presented the risks of escalating spillover violence, narco-insurgency, and even narco-terrorism, poses an inaccurate and unrealistic panorama of the situation in the two neighboring nations.⁴ U.S. intelligence and security officials have even suggested plausible ties between the major drug cartels operating in Mexico (such as the Zetas) and Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda affiliates. For example, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano mentioned this possibility in testimony before a congressional committee in February 2011. In particular, she expressed Washington’s concern about an eventual alliance between Al Qaeda and the Zetas (Wilkinson, 2011).

⁴ For example, a recent *Austin American-Statesman* analysis shows that official statistics “don’t back up claims of rampant drug cartel-related crime along [the U.S. side of the] border” (Schwartz and McDonald, 2011).

Many believe the possibility of such an alliance to be unrealistic, given the two organizations' different aims. "The lines should not be blurred to link the cartels with terrorist activities," said Carlos Pascual, former U.S. ambassador to Mexico (Aguilar, 2010: paragraph 8). Unlike Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups, Mexican DTOS do not espouse a political or religious ideology. Similarly, Eric Olson, a senior associate at the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, points out that DTOS are "not ideologically motivated" and therefore one needs to make a distinction between them and terrorist organizations (Aguilar, 2011b: paragraph 11).

Nevertheless, the idea that Mexican DTOS could form a profitable partnership with terrorists has been incorporated into a spectacle created by some interest groups or political actors in the United States to further their political and economic agendas. For example, U.S. Representative Michael McCaul (R-Austin), a former chief of counter terrorism and national security at the U.S. Attorney's Office, is "seeking to designate seven of the top Mexican cartels as 'foreign terrorist organizations,' a move he says would give law enforcement in the U.S. enhanced tools to combat the cartels" (Aguilar, 2011b: paragraph 1). In particular, he targets La Familia Michoacana, the cartel of Los Arellano Felix, the Zetas, the Beltran-Leyva cartel, as well as the Gulf, Juárez, and Sinaloa cartels.

McCaul says these organizations fit exactly the definition under the federal law on terrorism, since their purpose is "to intimidate a civilian population or a government by assassination or kidnappings." And adding to the spectacle of Mexico's drug violence, McCaul contends, "I am concerned that Mexico is losing this war against the drug cartels and so are we" (Aguilar, 2011b: paragraph 5). U.S. Congressman Silvestre Reyes agrees with McCaul, claiming that designating DTOS as terrorist organizations will "provide additional tools to help combat drug cartels and the threat they pose to the security of the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America" (Aguilar, 2011b: paragraph 9).

These types of statements have become common coin in the public discourse and are widely disseminated through the mass media. These claims by U.S. politicians and other political-economic actors are often made in order to manipulate the public perception of reality, justify specific policies, and achieve certain political and material goals. The spectacle of Mexico's drug violence has already had a concrete impact on U.S. public policy, particularly in the areas of immigration and national security. As Schwartz and McDonald point out, "Assessments of border security drive funding decisions involving hundreds of millions of dollars —ranging from sending National Guard troops to the Rio Grande and funding equipment and overtime for local enforcement agencies to building a [US]\$2.6 billion border fence"

(2011: paragraph 14). At the same time, such policies have had a significant impact on border economics, Mexico's border security policies, and economic development policies on both sides of the border.

THE SPECTACLE OF DRUG VIOLENCE, U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY, AND BORDER SECURITY

The Media Spectacle of Illegal Immigration and U.S. Immigration Policy

Immigration policy reform is one of the most controversial issues in the United States, home to approximately 11.2 million undocumented immigrants (Passel and Cohn, 2011), most of whom are Mexican.⁵ Most analysts agree the U.S.'s dysfunctional immigration policies need deep structural reform. But this appears unattainable for the near future, given U.S. electoral politics, the country's economic straits, and the unprecedented drug violence in Mexico, particularly in its northern border states. Indeed, all attempts to reform the U.S. immigration system in the last few years have failed, while new and controversial legislation that "criminalizes" undocumented immigrants has been passed in a number of states, including Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

In the meantime, the U.S. has implemented measures designed to curb illegal migration across the Mexican border. Among the most recent U.S. immigration policy initiatives is the construction of a wall along the border and the creation of a new guest worker program (Kretsedemas, 2008).⁶ U.S. authorities have increased the number of Border Patrol agents and the funding for better surveillance technology (Nevins, 2002). As a result of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, controls on immigration have tightened even more with the goal of protecting U.S. national security (Sheikh, 2008; Welch and Schuster, 2008). The exponential escalation of drug violence in the Mexican border states has reinforced this perspective, helping to impose higher barriers to immigration from the south and to scuttle the passage of a comprehensive immigration reform act.

⁵ According to Pew Hispanic Center estimates based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2011, some 6.1 million unauthorized Mexican immigrants were living in the U.S. (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012).

⁶ Recent pieces of immigration-related legislation impose harsher penalties for immigrants in general. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, for example, restricted access to public assistance programs for noncitizen legal immigrants, and set a lifetime limit on public assistance for all residents (National Research Council, 1998). Consider also the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 that significantly increased the categories of criminal activity for which immigrants, both legal and illegal, can be deported and detained (see Correa-Cabrera and Rojas-Arenaza, 2010).

The perception of an economic, security, and even cultural threat to the U.S. from Mexican immigration has increased in the last 20 years. Threat perception is central to the formation of negative opinions about immigrants, and public opinion about immigration in the United States has become increasingly negative. In fact, "research supports the contention that attitudes toward immigrants are hardening in the United States as the native population perceive threats to personal security and cultural identity" (Larsen, et al., 2009: 127).⁷ Fear of job loss to immigrants and increased demand on social services for undocumented immigrants—from health care to education—as well as concerns about illegal drug trafficking seem to be behind the increasingly negative anti-immigration attitudes in the United States (Andreas, 2000).

The release of inaccurate immigration statistics that depict net losses for U.S. society derived from undocumented immigration and the attention given them by the media have been at the center of many recent immigration policy debates in the United States. Anti-immigrant groups, with access to the mass media, have used these statistics to promote the idea that undocumented workers hurt the U.S. economy, increase crime rates, and take away the jobs of U.S. citizens (Correa-Cabrera and Rojas-Arenaza, 2010).

Media images not only reflect the national mood but also play a powerful role in shaping national discourse. In the recent years, the media have exercised significant influence over the public's increasing fear of undocumented immigration. The media appear to have created a spectacle of illegal immigration and U.S. immigration policy (Chavez, 2001, 2007, 2008). Leo Chavez (2007) views the Minuteman Project's border monitoring, for example, as a practice that combines both spectacle and surveillance. According to him, the Minuteman Project used surveillance to produce a spectacle on the Arizona-Mexico border. Finding undocumented border crossers became, for Chavez, part of the "show," and what he describes as a "media circus."

Most recently, illegal Mexican immigration has been associated with drug violence and even with Islamic terrorism. A careful analysis shows that these associations are wrong. Undocumented immigration, drug trafficking, and Middle Eastern terrorism are three separate and generally unrelated phenomena. Nevertheless, they have often been lumped together by the media as one intertwined problem. This perception has had a destructive impact on recent U.S. policies designed to regulate undocumented immigration and has prevented progress on immigration reform (Correa-Cabrera and Rojas-Arenaza, 2010).

⁷ At the same time, public discourse has produced and sustained negative public perceptions of the Latino community and its place in U.S. society (Santa Ana, 2002).

U.S. immigration policy today has not been effective even though illegal immigration to the United States from Mexico and Central America has diminished.⁸ According to some, the increasing amounts of resources spent on border surveillance do not seem to have been cost-effective in terms of the number of apprehended border crossers per dollar spent (Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002). Also, as Joseph Nevins comments, the recent strategies of deterring illegal immigration may raise the “costs and risks of reentering the United States,” thus encouraging illegal immigrants already in the United States to remain (2002: 128). According to Nevins, the new immigration legislation “has also encouraged, ironically, increased criminal activity in the form of migrant smuggling enterprises that now occur all along the border” (142).

What is more, new waves of immigrants experience further dilemmas related to drug trafficking, gang violence, and human rights abuses. This situation is evident in the Texas-Tamaulipas border region, where flows of illegal immigration to the U.S. are particularly significant. The new dilemmas of Mexico-U.S. migration in violent times in this area can be illustrated by two major cases: 1) the massacre of 72 migrants on August 25, 2010, in San Fernando, Tamaulipas; and 2) the discovery of dozens of stash houses in cities all along the Tamaulipas border in the past couple of years. In times of extreme drug violence in Mexico, illegal immigration has become a human problem of considerable dimensions. The media spectacle of violence and illegal immigration has contributed to this situation.

Border Enforcement and the Spectacle of Violence

Over the past 20 years, law enforcement has visibly intensified along the border between the United States and Mexico. Examples of related legislation include California Proposition 187,⁹ Operation Blockade,¹⁰ and Operation Gatekeeper. Greater attention has been paid to this issue because of changes in economic and social forces in the United States (Andreas, 2000). U.S. public discourse and the media spectacle of drug violence in Mexico have had a significant impact on the issue as well. The

⁸ According to a recent Pew Hispanic Center report, “The net migration flow from Mexico to the United States has stopped and may have reversed” (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012).

⁹ California Proposition 187 was a 1994 ballot initiative to establish a state-run citizenship screening system and deny education, health, and social services to undocumented immigrants. California voters passed the proposed law as a referendum in November 1994, but it was challenged in a legal suit and found unconstitutional by a federal court.

¹⁰ This strategy was designed and implemented by the El Paso Border Patrol and consisted of posting 400 agents directly on the banks of the Rio Grande in highly visible positions to deter unauthorized border crossings into the urban areas of El Paso from neighboring Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

“perceived” risks of spillover violence, and now of narco-terrorism, have led to the further strengthening of U.S. border enforcement with such measures as the construction of a border fence.

But for some U.S. politicians, such measures are not nearly enough, given the surge of drug-related violence in Mexico. Border enforcement has apparently become a “political necessity” (Andreas, 2000). Consider, for example, the following statement by Texas Representative Michael McCaul: “Before we start talking about reforming our immigration policy we need to prioritize our national security and gain operational control of the border. . . . Despite the president’s rhetoric that he has gone ‘above and beyond’ to secure the border, this mission is not accomplished” (*Fox News*, 2011: paragraph 8).

One of the actions suggested to keep the Mexican mayhem from spilling over into the U.S. is to send troops to the border. Some politicians have even advocated sending troops into Mexico itself to fight against the alleged narco-insurgency and to protect the U.S. against narco-terrorism. In this context, a number of state governments in the United States are “taking it upon themselves to pass draconian immigration laws and deploy troops to the border, reacting to a perceived federal failure to act” (Aguilar, 2010: paragraph 12).

For example, in 2010, Texas Governor Rick Perry asked the federal government for “3 000 extra border patrol officers, 1 000 National Guard troops and aerial drones . . . to counter escalating border violence in Texas” (Aaronson, 2011: paragraph 11). Similarly, on April 26, 2011, the Texas State Senate passed a non-binding resolution that asks the Obama administration for more financial support in securing its border with Mexico. In particular, it asks for extra funds for Texas to enforce existing immigration laws. “The inability of Washington to develop some form of comprehensive immigration reform that might address [the] border security problem puts an unfair and unreasonable burden on the entire state,” the resolution said (Aaronson, 2011: paragraph 4).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Drastic measures have been taken both at the state and federal levels in the United States to strengthen border enforcement as a response to the unprecedented levels of drug violence in Mexico. The extreme responses to this phenomenon seem to have been influenced by a spectacle advanced by U.S. politicians and other political-economic actors with particular agendas and economic interests. Are these responses effective? Are they beneficial for the U.S. American population in general? How are

they affecting U.S.-Mexico relations? It is not clear that recent U.S. border security measures have been effective in solving the problems that led to their creation. It is not clear, in particular, that such measures have solved the problem of illegal immigration. It is not clear whether the United States needs to implement these policies, or if a spectacle of drug violence has been utilized only to advance particular interests or political agendas.

Evidence shows that the extremely high costs of the most recent border security measures, including the construction of a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border, have far exceeded their social and economic benefits. One could argue that the considerable amount of resources allocated for border protection could have been used more effectively to solve problems in other areas, such as unemployment, education, social development, and the creation of infrastructure for economic development. Assessing the effects of these policies is still premature, but as of today, they do not seem to have had a net positive impact on the U.S. economy and society. However, they have apparently served to advance particular interests and electoral/political agendas. The benefits of tighter border enforcement in the United States have been mainly political and selective.

Some of these recent border security measures have led to a sharp rise in the number of deaths of unauthorized border crossers. Human rights abuses and enforcement excesses inflicted on local Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants have increased as a result of this new approach to border security and undocumented immigration (Dunn, 2009). At the same time, these measures have had a negative impact on Mexico's border economies, and thus on Mexico's economic development in general (Correa-Cabrera, 2011). The negative effects of violence and U.S. border security policies on Mexico's economic progress and political stability would also eventually affect the United States, as well as the relations between the two nations.

In other words, the current situation on the Mexican side of the border and the U.S. border policy framework might have negatively affected both countries. U.S. border policing and immigration policies, in particular, have helped "to produce social boundaries between "Americans" and "Mexicans," "citizens" and "aliens" (Nevins, 2002: 59). In fact, as Mexican Professor John M. Ackerman recognizes, Mexico's drug war strategy and the U.S. increase of border security are "short sighted and damaging to both countries. . . . Instead of militarization, the United States should be working with Mexico on creative ways to bring about the social and economic development it needs" (Del Bosque, 2011c: paragraph 15). Indeed, the spectacle of border violence in the context of assessing effective policy measures plays a greater role in determining the gains and losses on both sides of the border.

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