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### A NARCO HISTORY BY CARMEN BOULLOSA AND MIKE WALLACE

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Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace

*A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"*

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"This," writes historian James Loewen in his classic deprogramming text *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, referring to the murky use of "chaos" to describe complicated conflicts in foreign lands, "is standard textbook rhetoric: Chaos seems always to be breaking out or about to break out, and Americans intervene only 'reluctantly.'" "Chaos breaking out," as Loewen points out, is typically a means of exonerating the United States of its role in bringing about the very violence it then "reluctantly" decides to alleviate through military intervention.

This same exonerative usage of "chaos" has come to define media reports on the Mexican Drug War, providing a seemingly bottomless well of barbarity from which to draw horrifying clickbait. I did a quick Google News search for articles containing the words "Mexico," "cartel," and "chaos" and came up with 4,440

results. Time magazine's quotation of a U.S. Joint Forces Command report is typical of the usage: "Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone." Wired even created a "Cartel Chaos" tag for its stories about Mexico's drug violence.

"Chaos," while it may be an accurate description of the violence and fear Mexicans experience, tends to cover up the roles played by the U.S. and Mexican governments in laying the groundwork for the current violence. *A Narco History*, co-written by Mexican novelist Carmen Boullosa and American historian Mike Wallace, aims to provide that context, showing how the cartels did not come out of nowhere, but rather arose out of a prohibitionist legal framework largely imposed by the US and a corrupt enforcement regime developed by the Mexican government.

After opening with a detailed examination of the disappearance of forty-three students in Iguala, Guerrero, an event which sparked weeks of outrage and protest in Mexico and which could prove to be a turning point in Mexico's drug violence, Boullosa and Wallace proceed to lay out, chronologically, the history of drug enforcement in Mexico, from its earliest prohibition measures in 1920 to its nascent reform movement today, devoting about two-thirds of the book to the period from 2000 to the present.

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The best part of Boullosa and Wallace's book is their salvaging of many forgotten stories from the Drug War. For example, in the 1930s, Mexico's drug policy and enforcement was in the hands of the public health department, not law enforcement, and then head Dr. Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra, who believed marijuana to be essentially harmless, was moving toward establishing a state-run monopoly on the marijuana trade, thereby cutting out criminal traffickers. This approach ran in direct contradistinction to US policy, which was largely in the hands of Harry Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, who managed to save his department (which formerly had been tasked with enforcing Prohibition) and his own career by shifting the bureaucratic enforcement apparatus from alcohol to marijuana. Anslinger immediately imposed an embargo on all medicinal drug exports to Mexico, and the State Department applied additional pressures, thereby killing Salazar Viniegra's experiment before it had even begun and thus opening the door for organized crime.

Similar stories abound in *A Narco History*, such as in 1986, when Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which allowed the executive branch to cut off aid and oppose international loan requests to any country that was not sufficiently cooperating with American narcotics control efforts. "Thus," as Boullosa and Wallace cogently note, "did the US, the world's largest consumer of illegal drugs, set itself up as judge of other countries' progress on solving a problem the US could not."

For decades, Mexico's economic fortunes have been intimately tied to the US's; when the US catches a cold, Mexico catches the flu. In the 1980s, Fed Chairman Paul Volcker engineered a recession to fight inflation. This had devastating consequences for Mexico's economy, which opened the door for the US, in concert with the World Bank and IMF, to impose neoliberalism on the Mexican people. These reforms brutalized labor, pushing many people out of their jobs and into the "informal economy" of the cartels. The working class's woes were further exacerbated by the passage of NAFTA, which pushed out Mexican farmers in favor of American agribusinesses. Within six years, over two million farmers had abandoned their land, most moving to the cities, where many found work with the cartels. NAFTA also increased cross-border traffic, which assisted the free flow of drugs from Mexico to the US and high-powered assault weapons in the other direction, thus transforming the cartels into paramilitary outfits often more powerful than the Mexican military itself.

In response to the US's push for criminalization, Mexico's drug policy has largely been defined by two poles, corruption—in which bribes paid to the police and politicians created a kind of de facto regulatory system that enhanced the power of the cartels but largely kept violent crime down—and militarism—in which the cartels were fought as if they were an insurgency. In the 21st century, Mexico increasingly moved toward the latter pole, especially during the presidency of Felipe Calderón, who declared all-out war on the cartels, particularly focusing on taking out the heads. This approach led to no clear victories and massive casualties, conservatively estimated at 70,000 during Calderón's term. In Tijuana alone, the death toll was 109,000. "Had Calderón not lifted a finger," Boullosa and Wallace argue, "the mortality count would almost certainly have been but a fraction of that generated by his own intervention."

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Boullosa and Wallace, by condensing a vast amount of material into a relatively short book, have provided a valuable overview of the way the US and Mexico constructed the War on Drugs. Their focus on US policy and debilitating neoliberal economic reforms, which crush Mexico's economy, are particularly apposite. However, although the book was intended for an American audience with minimal knowledge of Mexico (which certainly includes myself), *A Narco History* can at times be a slow and slightly confusing read. It can be difficult to keep track of various acronyms, organizations, and names, many of which figure into the story for only a few pages. I wonder whether the material might have been better served by a different format, perhaps thematic chapters that provide historical context as needed, as opposed to the strictly chronological approach the book takes. If there is any topic which requires a strong counter-narrative to stand against the standard line—of "chaos" and "barbarity" existing in a vacuum—it is this one. *A Narco History* provides plenty of material to piece together that counter-narrative, but the forest sometimes gets lost in the trees.

But at least Boullosa and Wallace manage to end on a hopeful note, pointing the way toward a possible end to the War on Drugs, one which mobilizes people in the US and Mexico to take control of drug policy. In the US, this would involve legalization. In Mexico, it would mean a new nexus of state and civil society, one focused on bolstering communities and rooting out corruption. This war was created by governments. Hopefully, with the will and the right approach, it can be ended by them, too.

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