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**Deadly Business:
The Making of the Modern Cartel**

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by

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Introduction

On April 1, 2018, US President Donald Trump once again attacked Mexico for allowing drugs and people to flow freely through the country into the United States. He tweeted, “[Mexico] must stop the big drug and people flow, or I will stop their cash cow, NAFTA. NEED WALL!” His statement comes after claiming the United States would pull out of trade negotiations if Mexico did not do more to secure its northern border. Although the tweet has since been deleted and replaced with an attack on US democrats for inaction and weak policies, frontrunner for the upcoming Mexican presidential election, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, issued a statement of his own. At a campaign event in Ciudad Juárez, he stated, “We are going to be very respectful toward the United States government, but we are also going to demand that (the United States) respect Mexicans.” He went on to assert, “Neither Mexico nor its people will be the piñata of any foreign government.”¹ This exchange illustrates the current political climate between the two countries. In the United States, the current administration uses hyperbolic rhetoric in an attempt to gain a position of power over the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, this type of bullying only serves to move talks further away from achieving a deal. Both countries need to recognize and take

¹ AFP, “Mexico Presidential Front-runners Hit Back at Trump Tweets,” *The Express Tribune* (April 2, 2018). <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1675018/3-mexico-presidential-front-runners-hit-back-trump-tweets/>.

accountability for their actions in creating the current drug and humanitarian problems in Mexico.

Both the United States and Mexico had a hand in nurturing the violent drug trade in Mexico. While some individuals attribute the rise of organized crime in Mexico to the fall of Colombian drug lords in the early-1990s and the democratic political opening in Mexico, culminating in the 2000 presidential election, these reasons attribute passive responsibility to the United States and Mexico. First, in the case of the collapse of Colombian cartels, Mexican criminal groups did gain more power because narcos now had the ability to take control of the flow of goods. The second argument only highlights institutional failings in Mexico. Because of the democratic opening in Mexico, the once tacit oversight government had over organized crime fractured, and the new government allowed organized crime to rise.² However, neither of these arguments considers how and why cartels underwent a corporatization and militarization process.

Understanding these two processes, and each government's role, is critical for productive negotiation talks and reducing the level of violence in Mexico. Corporatization can be understood as the creation of subsidiaries through horizontal integration, diversification of business portfolio, and the control of land and infrastructure. Mexico's neoliberal reforms during the 1980s and 1990s allowed organized crime "to diversify their activities and to operate more as modern transnational

² Miguel Ángel Pérez Vite, "La violencia y vulnerabilidad en México: Una lectura crítica," <http://cei.colmex.mx/Estudios%20sobre%20violencia/Estudios%20Violencia%20México%20Materiales%20recibidos/Miguel%20Vite,%20Vulnerabilidad.pdf>.

corporations with less centralized government control.”³ For example, with the protection of political elites, such as Carlos Salinas, the Gulf Cartel experienced an exponential growth throughout the 1990s. This growth created the need for corporate security, which spawned Los Zetas, who started the process of militarization—the adoption of military tactics, strategies, and procedures. Los Zetas was the first group to undergo this process and codified the corporate-military model organized crime uses today.

This paper seeks to provide a historical perspective on Mexico’s Drug War and how neoliberal policies and corruption produced the corporatization and militarization of organized crime. Without the neoliberal reforms and government corruption, organized crime would not have experienced such rapid growth. Therefore, with the current US administration calling for the renegotiation of NAFTA, understanding these two processes can help US and Mexican decision-makers work to decrease the power and influence of criminal groups and reduce the level of violence in Mexico. First, the paper provides a historiographical overview of drug history in Mexico, so anyone interested in understanding of the issues further can access the longer, more detailed history. Next, the paper breaks down into two chapters. Chapter One discusses how Mexican President Carlos Salinas’ administration implemented a neoliberal reform in Mexico, culminating in NAFTA. It then explains how the neoliberal reforms generated the corporatization of cartels and speculates on the administration’s connections to organized crime, particularly the Gulf Cartel. Chapter two then moves to explain how corporatization gave

³ Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas, Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 24.

rise to Los Zetas, who started the militarization of organized crime. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the impact of these two processes, which have resulted in unprecedented levels of violence, and it offers some points of negotiation that Mexico and the United States should consider rather than blaming one another.

Historiography

When researching contentious topics—such as human rights violations, violence, or government repression—tracking down and identifying potential evidence is critical, yet difficult. After locating a source base, the material then influences the methodological lens through which a project may take shape. Evidence presents an issue for any research project; however, for contentious topics, access to materials becomes all the more problematic. Mexico’s drug history is one topic in which access to sources is limited. Researchers must be creative with identifying potential collections and methodological approaches to produce strong, empirical scholarship. Although Mexico’s Drug War is a difficult topic to study, research is necessary to understand Mexico’s current political and security problems. Recently, scholars across several disciplines have begun filling this historiographical gap, but much more work still remains.

Historians Paul Gootenberg and Isaac Campos offer an excellent starting point for researchers interested in drug history. In “Toward a New Drug History of Latin America: A Research Frontier at the Center of Debates,” Gootenberg and Campos explore how drug history was previously conducted and offer a clear framework for a new drug history. According to the two authors, the old drug history fetishized drugs and organized

crime too much rather than producing research that provides context and draws connections to larger issues in Latin America. As such, the *Hispanic American Historical Review* article provides some historiographical and methodological approaches towards researching drug history and consists of three main objectives.

First, Gootenberg and Campos explain that the periodization of drug history comprises of four distinct periods, and they then problematize differences between licit and illicit drugs, which requires them to start with a broad definition. The authors rely on anthropologist Sidney Mintz's definition of drug foods that includes licit and illicit drugs, such as coffee, tobacco, cocaine, and marijuana. The four periods of drug history are pre-Columbian, colonial, the long nineteenth century of national drugs (1800-1940), and the globalization of illicit drug circuits (1940-present).⁴

The second objective is to provide suggestions on methodological approaches to drug history. Here, they connect the difficulties of conducting drug history to the difficulties of doing subaltern studies, and they explain why successful approaches to subaltern studies can aid in achieving quality drug history scholarship. Gootenberg and Campos explain that meaningful drug history can be approached through various subfields, such as social, cultural, policy, diplomatic, imperial, and legal history. Therefore, drug history lends itself to interdisciplinary studies.⁵ Finally, the third

⁴ Gootenberg, Paul, and Isaac Campos. "Toward a New Drug History of Latin America: A Research Frontier at the Center of Debates." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (Feb 2015): 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

objective is to provide three example essays, which follows Gootenberg's and Campos' article, that illustrate this new approach.

The new drug history requires researchers to stop fetishizing drug history and make connections to the larger problems facing Latin America. While Gootenberg and Campos did not invent the new drug history standard, their article is the first to clearly articulate what it is. The two historians use the historiography available to establish the periodization of drug history into four distinct eras and explain why an interdisciplinary approach best serves scholarly investigation. Gootenberg and Campos are pioneering the field of drug history and call on scholars to answer tough questions, such as how did corporatization and militarization of cartels take place, which this paper seeks to address.

Luis Alejandro Astorga Almanza is a prominent drug historian from Mexico, who Gootenberg and Campos rightly acknowledge as partaking in this new drug history approach since the mid-1990s. Astorga Almanza's seminal work is *El Siglo de Las Drogas: El Narcotráfico, Del Porfiriato Al Nuevo Milenio*. First published in 1996, *El Siglo de Las Drogas* is now in its third edition, which was published in 2016.⁶ This classic and concise piece of scholarship explores the history of prohibited drugs, their uses, and their relationship to various actors from the Porfiriato to the present. A key objective is to provide a better understanding about the relationship between crime and politics and how perceptions about certain drugs changed over time. To understand and show change over time, Astorga Almanza structures the book around various decades and

⁶ Luis Alejandro Astorga Almanza, *El Siglo de Las Drogas: El Narcotráfico, Del Porfiriato Al Nuevo Milenio* (México, D.F.: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial México, 2016).

traces the relationship of drugs, such as opium and marijuana, with individuals and institutions. Because of the book's long periodization, it provides a survey of Mexico's long twentieth century drug history. Astorga Almanza's work presents an introduction to Mexico's drug history and offers an entry point for future scholars to investigate a specific topic or decade.

While Astorga Almanza traverses two periods that Gootenberg and Campos described in their article, Ricardo Pérez Montfort positions his work firmly in the period of the long nineteenth century. In *Tolerancia y Prohibición: Aproximaciones a la Historia Social y Cultural de las Drogas en México, 1840-1940*, Pérez Montfort explores how Mexican society and the government fostered and ultimately gave rise to drug prohibition in Mexico. Similar to Astorga Almanza, Pérez Montfort analyzes the relationship of drugs and their uses throughout Mexican society. However, by focusing on this earlier period, Pérez Montfort identifies several key cultural processes that resulted in creating Mexico's current policies towards drugs. Through a socio-cultural framework, Pérez Montfort discusses Mexico's restriction of both production and consumption of drugs. He constructs his argument using literature, cinema, newspapers, corridos, and government sources, which provide insights into how Mexican society functioned at the time. However, his spatial focus is limited to Mexico City.

Although Pérez Montfort's national context narrowly depicts society in Mexico City, his contextualization reflects social and cultural influence on state formation. Pérez Montfort illustrates how dangerous substances, such as alcohol, marijuana, and opium, became a public health concern in need of prohibiting to help establish control of the

population from the 1840s through the revolution. Consequently, government prohibition gave rise to an informal market for illicit goods, which organized criminal groups stepped in to fill.

Pérez Montfort charts the transition of drugs from a public health issue to criminal prohibition, which came to a head in the revolutionary nation-building era. Towards the end of the violent period of the revolution, Mexico began outlawing drugs, such as opium and marijuana, and creating agencies to track the nascent illicit drug trade, such as *Buró de Narcóticos del Departamento de Tesoro*.⁷ Nonetheless, Pérez Montfort argues that even though the Mexican state prohibited certain drugs, cultural tolerance led to inefficient and corrupt practices regarding the restriction of narcotics, which fostered the rise of drug trafficking organizations.

Pérez Montfort's social and cultural approach produced an excellent piece of scholarship. His use of literature and cultural discourse allowed him to construct a history that highlights Mexico's desire to control its population. However, his use of government sources shows Mexico's lack of political will to accomplish its goal of drug prohibition, and his work illustrates the disconnect between legislation and implementation.

Regardless of the subject matter, Mexican historiography tends to produce a plethora of regional histories, and drug history is no different. Two of the top new drug history scholars today are Carlos Antonio Flores Pérez and Benjamin Smith. First, in *Historias de Polvo y Sangre Génesis y Evolución del Tráfico de Drogas en el Estado de*

⁷ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Tolerancia y Prohibición: Aproximaciones a la Historia Social y Cultural de las Drogas en México, 1840-1940* (Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, México, 2016), 268.

Tamaulipas, 1947-1987, Flores Pérez examines how the state of Tamaulipas became one marred with violence and organized crime. He uses an institutional approach to illustrate how a long history of corruption and impunity nurtured the rise of some of Mexico's most violent and profitable drug trafficking organizations, such as the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. Interestingly, while Flores Pérez's work depicts a regional history, he never traveled to the region to conduct archival research; instead, he relied on government documents and *hemerográfico* (i.e., newspaper and journal) resources to construct his argument away from the violence. According to Flores Pérez, Tamaulipas' violent drug problem stems from corrupt practices since the 1940s that over decades relinquished control of the state to organized crime.⁸ Sympathetic to the current need for better understanding of the historical processes that facilitated Tamaulipas' existing problems, but not wanting to endanger himself, Flores Pérez took advantage of archives in Mexico City, contemporary historiography, and online sources to demonstrate how historic actors fostered instability in the region. He relied on Mexican security and judicial institutions to construct his argument, and he shows how these institutions understood the growing problem but ultimately failed at rectifying the situation in Tamaulipas.

Second, similar to Flores Pérez, historian Benjamin Smith analyzes a specific region to better understand Mexico's current Drug War. In "The Rise and Fall of Narcopopulism: Drugs, Politics, and Society in Sinaloa, 1930-1980," Smith explores post-revolutionary state formation processes to identify the interplay between state

⁸ Carlos Antonio Flores Pérez. *Historias de Polvo y Sangre Génesis y Evolución del Tráfico de Drogas en el Estado de Tamaulipas, 1947-1987* (CIESAS, México, 2013).

politics, drug trafficking, and social processes. His research shows the relationship between the state of Sinaloa, organized crime, and the national government. He argues that the post-revolutionary government did not rely on centralized power but rather on decentralized, interlinking pacts among state, regional, and other local interests to develop projects regarding *agrarismo*, education, and *indigenismo*. However, according to Smith, these revolutionary pacts were not only with legitimate groups but also forged with illicit groups, such as the drug trade. Smith develops the term “narcopopulism” to discuss the relationship between local and national officials with organized crime. He explains that the drug trade contributed to the social stability in two key ways—“appeasing both right-wing and radical groups.”⁹

For the drug trade’s assistance in state-building processes, government authorities turned a blind eye to the illicit growing and trafficking of narcotics. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Smith explains, governors of Sinaloa controlled and regulated the drug industry, allowing larger networks to develop. In the late-1960s, these political pacts began to crumble because of the Cold War and political repression of radicals. By the 1970s, state power fractured, leaving “the regulation of the drug trade disintegrated.”¹⁰ As such, the entrepreneurial drug trade began regulating itself and corrupting individual political officials, who sought self-enrichment. Smith’s regional focus allows him to understand how the revolutionary state formation projects tolerated Mexico’s burgeoning

⁹ Benjamin T. Smith, “The Rise and Fall of Narcopopulism: Drugs, Politics, and Society in Sinaloa, 1930-1980,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 127. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.2013.0015>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

drug trade for national unity. Using a political approach, he connects his regional study to larger social processes, and the impact these tacit agreements played in constructing the current Drug War. In contextualizing his argument, Smith relies on a number of US and Mexican sources, such as newspapers and government reports.

Another way scholars contribute to the larger study of drug history is through the study of a single commodity. In *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs*, Campos examines marijuana's long history in Mexico to understand the drug's eventual prohibition. Traversing virtually all four of the periods, Campos traces the drug's colonial adoption and usage through to the twentieth century, and he argues that marijuana's prohibition was not influenced from the outside but rather home grown.¹¹ He explains how marijuana came to Mexico through the Columbian Exchange and that the Spanish Crown first adopted the drug for its hemp and flax properties in the 1540s. However, after independence, elites became concerned with the drug's potential harm to Mexican culture.

Campos constructs his argument in a concise manner, and he highlights the fact that Mexico's decision to enter a prohibition era stems from issues concerning race, class, and cultural erosion. In making his argument, Campos makes the methodological choice to show changes in conception of marijuana between the colonial and independence periods. While it is possible that Campos could have made the same argument over a much shorter period, his argument becomes much more nuanced by including Mexico's

¹¹ Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

colonial legacy. Moreover, he is only able to conduct this study because of his focus on a single drug rather than a strict discussion of the prohibition era.

By focusing on marijuana, Campos has access to a variety of different sources. His evidence comes from centuries of materials collected from the colonial and modern era, which are housed in a multitude of archives in Mexico City. This source base allows Campos to examine marijuana through various historical lenses, such as social, cultural, political and commercial. His interdisciplinary approach gives him the ability to show Mexico's changing perceptions of the drug for political, cultural, and economic reasons. For example, while the Spanish saw the economic benefits of marijuana because of its versatility, independent Mexican elites began associating its consumption with criminals and the lower class.

Another great addition to drug history comes from one of Paul Gootenberg's former students. Froylán Enciso Higuera completed his dissertation in 2015, and he models his research on Gootenberg's study of cocaine in *Andean Cocaine*. In "The Origin of Contemporary Drug Contraband: A Global Interpretation from Sinaloa," Enciso Higuera examines how and why Sinaloa became a global leader in the illicit drug industry. While the dissertation claims to be a global history, the author makes sure to tell the story from a very local, Mexican perspective—thus, using Gootenberg's method of a "glocal" historical analysis. The method is simply having the awareness and understanding that there is no such thing as a true global history but rather a history of a particular region or nation that interacts and affects things beyond its borders. Moreover, to present his work in an unbiased fashion, he employs a speculative

heterophenomenological theoretical perspective, which moves from the frontiers outward to the global system.¹² This theory seems more academic than a useful theoretical framework because it simply means the author takes a scientific approach and privileges his archival materials above all. Therefore, Enciso Higuera conducted extensive archival research, and he made the decision to focus his project on local and national Mexican archives while still making use of digital non-Mexican databases. According to Enciso Higuera, the primary sources used came from statements of drug producers, traffickers, and users found in court records he uncovered in *Casa de la Cultura Jurídica de la Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación* in Mazatlan, Sinaloa.¹³ His originality comes from the unexplored nature of some of his archives. Because of these types of sources, Enciso Higuera's work shows how scholars can safely bring out some of the voices inside the illicit drug trade.

Another dissertation displays a transnational approach. Political scientist Carlos Pérez Ricart's work provides a solid historical analysis. In "Las Agencias Antinarcoóticos Y La Construcción Transnacional de La Guerra Contra Las Drogas En México (1938-1978)," Pérez Ricart examines the relationship between US and Mexican anti-drug agencies in creating anti-narcotic policies in Mexico from 1938 to 1978. Pérez Ricart asks how US agencies impacted anti-narcotic policies in Mexico and how Mexico's

¹² Enciso Higuera, Froylán Vladimir. "The Origin of Contemporary Drug Contraband: A Global Interpretation from Sinaloa." Dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2015, 9.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1763067714?accountid=711>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

northern neighbor influenced state policies. Because of the specific nature of the questions, Pérez Ricart uses a transnational approach to explore the fluidity of movement and ideas between the two nations. Ultimately, he argues that Mexico initiated US anti-drug policies during this thirty-year period. In constructing his argument, Pérez Ricart brings in numerous archival materials from US and Mexican archives. Moreover, one interesting source base Pérez Ricart uses is the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR). Pérez Ricart argues that a transnational historical approach is most fruitful in shedding light on potential contemporary policy recommendations because he views Mexico's Drug War as inherently tied to US-Mexico relations.¹⁴

Two recent books explore the impact one criminal group has had on Mexico: Los Zetas. First, political scientist George W. Grayson and investigative journalist Samuel Logan investigate the organization's founding, its implementation of violent tactics, and the idea of dual sovereignty within certain Mexico regions in *The Executioner's Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created*. Grayson and Logan do a remarkable job at explaining the consequences of Los Zetas, both nationally and internationally. While their argument about dual sovereignty is understandable, it takes away agency from the Mexican state. Los Zetas, as with other criminal groups, do not want to subvert state control but rather seek to take advantage of infrastructure and operate within the state. Here, organized crime's operations differ from Smith's narcopopulism because government no longer regulates the drug industry;

¹⁴ Carlos Pérez Ricart, "Las Agencias Antinarcóticos Y La Construcción Transnacional de La Guerra Contra Las Drogas En México (1938-1978)." Ph.D Dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2016.

instead, criminal groups corrupt government officials as needed while allowing the state to function. Moreover, although the authors argue for the “zetanization” of Mexico, they do not explain how Los Zetas altered rival groups and the government, and forced both to adapt to this new model, resulting in unprecedented levels of violence. By subscribing to Los Zetas’ model, Mexico has become increasingly violent since the late-1990s.¹⁵

More recently, in 2017, political scientist Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera produced a deep dive into the corporate model of the criminal group in *Los Zetas, Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*. Correa-Cabrera spent seven years researching and conducting oral interviews in the United States, Mexico, and Zeta territories to construct her study. Through an economic perspective, the book explores how criminal groups morphed into transnational organizations, specifically focusing on Los Zetas. She identifies how the criminal organization functions similar to large corporations, such as Exxon, and use a subsidiary structure. By using this structure, organized crime, as with legitimate businesses, can insulate the partner company if one cell gets in trouble with the law. Moreover, the various subsidiaries control different aspects of the business, such as extortion, drug trade, harvesting hydrocarbons, etc. Correa-Cabrera also explains how this violent corporate model sparked a heavy military response from the government, essentially creating a modern civil war. Yet, she does question whether or not the violence in Mexico between organized crime and the government constitutes being called a civil war.

¹⁵ George W. Grayson and Samuel Logan, *The Executioner’s Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012).

Los Zetas, Inc. provides a great piece of scholarly literature for policy-makers to understand the current problems in Mexico. However, it focuses on the business model rather than how US and Mexican policies fostered the violent, corporate-military model she investigates. Correa-Cabrera's study provides much more detail about the corporatization and militarization of organized crime than this paper provides, and it is a must-read for anyone seeking a much deeper understanding of Mexico's current situation. This report only seeks to offer a brief understanding of these two key processes and highlight the unintended consequences of government policies and offer suggestions to reduce violence in Mexico in light of the renegotiation of NAFTA. If the current negotiations refuse to consider how policies impact organized crime, criminal groups will only continue to grow in size and strength.

Chapter One: Corporatization of Organized Crime

Most people today acknowledge the systemic corruption that exists in Mexico and the government's links to organized crime. However, during the 1980s and early 1990s, many US officials believed Mexico was undergoing a modernizing process and combating corruption. The United States thought Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was spearheading Mexico's change through neoliberal policies, which privatized many sectors of the economy, culminating in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States and Canada. The United States also promoted Salinas as a champion against drug trafficking organizations and government corruption. Yet, Mexico has since seen an exponential increase in narcotic activity. If Salinas was fighting corruption and organized crime, why did cartels experience such tremendous growth during his administration? Cartels came to plague Mexico because the Salinas administration bolstered strong relationships with narcos, particularly the Gulf Cartel, and its neoliberal policies facilitated the corporatization of criminal groups.

Carlos Salinas de Gortari emerged onto the Mexican political scene during Miguel de la Madrid's presidency. After earning a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard, Salinas joined de la Madrid's cabinet in 1982 as the Secretary of Planning and Budget. He was considered part of a new generation of politicians who believed in free trade and capitalism. During his tenure in the de la Madrid administration, Salinas first began his neoliberal onslaught on the inherited legacy from the Mexican Revolution.¹⁶ In

¹⁶ Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"* (New York: OR Books, 2015), 47.

1987, by working diligently for the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), de la Madrid named Salinas as his chosen successor for president; however, this endorsement did not mean Salinas would go unchallenged.

As part of the Democratic Front within the PRI, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of revolutionary reformist Lázaro Cárdenas, was outraged over the PRI's lack of democracy and neoliberal policies. He ran against Salinas in the 1988 Presidential election.¹⁷ More importantly, Cárdenas presented the first real threat to the decades-long single party rule of the PRI. Cárdenas was decisively ahead in the polls on the day of the election; unfortunately, voting computers suddenly crashed abruptly halting the election. A month later officials publicly declared Salinas the winner.¹⁸ Many considered the results to be blatant electoral fraud, which caused people to become furious. An estimated 250,000 citizens converged on Zócalo Plaza in Mexico City, many holding effigies of Salinas, shouting: "You're a liar, baldy, you lost the election! We'll pull him out by the ears! *Viva el Presidente Cárdenas!*"¹⁹ Clearly, Salinas entered the presidency under a cloud of suspicion. This public distrust, however, did not deter Salinas from implementing his counter-revolutionary policies.

Salinas the Drug Czar

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸ Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 76-77.

¹⁹ Boullosa and Wallace, *A Narco History*, 49.

Richard Nixon declared “war on drugs” in a 1971 speech, and the United States has since strong-armed other countries to assist them in their anti-narcotic efforts. To achieve his political reforms, Salinas understood this fact and gave the illusion of combating drug trafficking. One particular foreign policy that influenced Salinas’ actions was the 1986 US Omnibus Anti-Drug Bill. The bill was the result of three US Congressional reports issued by the Tower Commission, Walsh Commission, and Kerry Commission. These reports concluded various drug lords in Latin America aided the Contra movement in Nicaragua in return for the United States assisting them in trafficking narcotics.²⁰ From these commissions’ conclusions, the United States passed the Omnibus Anti-Drug Bill, which created a certification process. The purpose of this process was to ensure that all major drug smuggling nations cooperated with the United States’ drug war. If US officials determined any country was not fully cooperating, it would decertify the nation, meaning barring any decertified state from receiving US aid, International Monetary Fund loans, and more.²¹ These benefits are vital to any, if not all, narco-trafficking nations and could have devastating ramifications on the country’s economy, so Salinas made certain that Mexico appeared as fully cooperating with US drug enforcement agencies.

Salinas was ambitious and could not afford to lose US support if he hoped to accomplish his neoliberal goals. In 1988, at his inaugural address, Salinas declared, “Drug trafficking has become a grave threat to the security of Mexico and to the health of

²⁰ Anabel Hernández, *Narcoland* (London: Verso, 2014), 49.

²¹ Phillip L. Russell, *Mexico Under Salinas* (Austin: Mexico Resource Center, 1994), 319.

Mexicans.”²² This pronouncement led the United States to believe that the Salinas administration would be the ally it needed in the war on drugs. Unfortunately, Salinas’ familial connection to the Gulf Cartel was unknown at the time, so Mexico was able to foster the image of bilateral cooperation. The Salinas administration promoted a number of anti-narcotics policies, such as the creation of the National Institute for the Fight Against Drug Trafficking, increasing Custom inspectors’ salaries, bilateral intelligence operations, and many more. Because of Salinas’ efforts to wage war on drugs, the US Department of State, in 1993, proclaimed, “Mexico’s anti-drug effort is among the most dynamic and comprehensive in the hemisphere.”²³ However, scandal after scandal involving government corruption came to light, yet the United States continued to certify Mexico. This lack of accountability allowed Salinas to push for a North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States virtually unimpeded by the government’s connections to organized crime.

Salinas’ public anti-narcotic stance, however, did not fool everyone. Phillip Jordan, retired (1996) Drug Enforcement Agent and former Director of the El Paso Intelligence Center, testified before the US Congressional House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources that “every year since certification was approved, Mexico will do a show-and-

²² *Ibid.*, 319.

²³ United States Department of State. NAFTA and the War on Drugs: Facts and Fiction (1993).
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679100156?accountid=711>.

tell-type thing... right before February-March.”²⁴ Here, Jordan points out how Mexican authorities would conduct a large seizure or make a big arrest to secure US certification. He went on to argue that Mexico “so contorted the process that they have convinced some people that there should be an international certification..., which is one of the most unbelievable distortions of denying U.S. sovereignty and who gets these trade benefits or financial assistance.”²⁵ Shockingly, throughout the tenure of the certification process, which ended in the mid-2000s, Mexico was never decertified.

Besides Salinas’ masquerade as an anti-narcotic soldier, US economic interests have more to do with Mexico receiving certification each year. The United States played softball with Mexico compared to other countries. For example, despite knowing about countless corrupt officials and charges of impunity towards organized crime, Mexico continued to receive certification; whereas, in Colombia, where US economic interests are lower, the United States decertified the country on discovering that drug money contaminated the election of President Samper in the late 1990s.²⁶ The justification for continued US certification, however, was not made public until February 29, 2000.

²⁴ United States Congress House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources. *United States-Mexico Counternarcotics Efforts* (2000), 73.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679099356?accountid=711>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ U. S. Congress. Subcommittee on General Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Banking and Financial Services; Committee on Banking and Financial Services. “Money Laundering Activity Associated with the Mexican Narco-Crime Syndicate” Sep. 5, 1996 Committee on Banking and Financial Services Serial No. 104-72, 162.
<HTTP://congressional.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1996-bfs-0028?accountid=7118>.

Congressman John Mica reported to the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources, “While decertification would suspend assistance to Mexico, the greatest impact would be on EXIM Bank financing. Mexico is the single largest beneficiary of EXIM programs, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars in business to U.S. exporters and service providers.”²⁷ Undoubtedly aware of the potential ramifications to the United States if Mexico were ever decertified, Salinas maintained a strong public appearance as an anti-narcotic proponent in order to foster support for his neoliberal agenda, which allowed organized crime to adopt a corporate model and take advantage of the recent privatization and newly developed infrastructure.

Neoliberal Policies and Consequences

During Salinas’ *sexenio* (1988-1994)—six-year presidential term—he vigorously sought privatization. Salinas proclaimed his reasoning in his 1989 State of the Nation address explaining, “Most of the reforms of our revolution have run their course and no longer guarantee the new development Mexico demands.”²⁸ Here, in order for Mexico to modernize and become a global leader, Salinas thought the country needed to embrace neoliberal and capitalist reforms, which he first started during the de la Madrid administration. He was able to report in 1991 that he had reduced the number of federally

²⁷ United States Congress House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources. *United States-Mexico Counternarcotics Efforts* (2000), 93.

²⁸ Phillip L. Russell, *Mexico Under Salinas* (Austin: Mexico Resource Center, 1994), 183.

owned companies by 266.²⁹ Additionally, in 1992, Salinas modified Article 27 of the constitution to allow the privatization of *ejidos*—communal lands. It is believed that the expropriation of *ejido* lands for private investment has led to around 400,000 square kilometers being controlled by organized crime.³⁰ Because of Salinas, the US Congressional Research Service asserts, “Mexico has reduced the size of its government through privatization and macroeconomic reforms, and it has opened the economy to trade and investment.”³¹ Salinas’ policies created an enormous amount of wealth for the elite class in the country as well. For example, one way some generated wealth was through the privatization of highway construction. The government allowed private citizens the ability to build four-lane highways and charge tolls, and these new roads connect rural lands to the border allowing for more efficient transporting of goods: licit and illicit alike.³² When *Forbes* came out with their billionaires list in 1987, Mexico only had one individual on it, but the country increased that number to twenty-four billionaires by 1994.³³

Salinas also succeeded in creating greater inequality. Through the opening of Mexico’s markets and privatization, the relative purchasing power of minimum wages

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁰ Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas, Inc.*, 222-23.

³¹ United States Library of Congress Congressional Research Service. Drug Certification of Mexico: Arguments for and Against Congressional Resolutions of Disapproval (1997), 5. <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679101686?accountid=711>.

³² Russell, *Mexico Under Salinas*, 187.

³³ Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 77.

was reduced, which contributed to an influx of laborers into the drug trade.³⁴ Salinas at least had the foresight to understand the potential impact on the lower classes, so, as a way to garner public support, he established the National Solidarity Program (PRONASOL) in 1989. PRONASOL attempted to appease the masses with a set of “neopopulist solutions”—a cultural program that fosters national unity—to curb the problems created from his neoliberal reforms.³⁵ He then doubled down on the program in 1991 elevating it to a cabinet level position with the creation of the Ministry for Social Development (SEDESOL). With public opinion high, the program achieved its goals of securing PRI votes in the 1991, mid-term election.³⁶ Yet, it was Salinas’ ability to establish the North American Free Trade Agreement that secured his place as a neoliberal reformer.

The development of a free trade agreement, besides many other factors, possesses an interesting history of exchange between President Salinas and US President George H. W. Bush. With his perfect English, Carlos Salinas began immediately wooing President Bush once he entered office. On October 3, 1989, at their first meeting, President Salinas got straight to business explaining, “The first subject I would like to mention is trade. We took positive steps to open trade before we got any benefits. Now we are asking for reciprocity.”³⁷ President Bush agreed with Salinas, but he had concerns about drug

³⁴ Russell, *Mexico Under Salinas*, 277.

³⁵ José Luis Velasco, *Insurgency, Authoritarianism, and Drug Trafficking in Mexico’s “Democratization”* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ United States, White House. Meeting with Mexican President Carlos Salinas De Gortari (1989), 2-3.

activity. Salinas quickly stated, “I would like to mention that we are fighting drugs because they are a threat to our national security. Drug trafficking is a scourge....”³⁸ Understanding the need to combat the drug trade as it pertains to a NAFTA deal, the two presidents continued to push their countries’ respective agendas over the next few years.

Salinas and Bush worked to resolve the trade matter, but they faced some opposition. In 1990, they addressed several potential issues that the opposition raised. One of the more outlandish issues was their discussion of being environmentally conscious. On that subject, President Salinas somewhat exasperated explained, “One area where we have made real progress is on the environment and Mexico’s sea turtles... As President Bush knows, we protect not only the sea turtles, but land turtles.” To which President Bush jokingly replied, “It is good for both countries to improve the conditions for turtles to make love!”³⁹ This playful back-and-forth suggests that although Salinas and Bush were confident a deal would be accomplished, they did not know how long it would take.

By 1991, President Bush, somewhat frustrated, explained in front of his staff, President Salinas, and several of his advisors that his administration was committed to a

<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679100337?accountid=711>.

³⁸ United States, White House. Meeting with Mexican President Carlos Salinas De Gortari (1989), 4.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679100337?accountid=711>.

³⁹ United States, White House. Memorandum of Conversation with President Carlos Salinas of Mexico (1990), 6.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679128975?accountid=711>.

free trade agreement. “I wanted each of you to hear from me that no matter how hot the political pressures become,” Bush asserts, “we will not move an inch back.... We are pregnant. We are not going to get unpregnant.”⁴⁰ President Salinas was excited by President Bush’s statement, and he was happy to inform him that Mexico was “fully committed... [and] Two-thirds are for it and it is not that the others are all against it.”⁴¹ This exchange was not only for the benefit of the two presidents but also their staff, and they wished to encourage them to seek out those who opposed the agreement and secure their votes.

Although Bush would leave office before any agreement came to fruition, Salinas’ goal of achieving a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) did occur. During the presidency of Bill Clinton, Salinas obtained a monumental achievement in foreign policy. NAFTA took effect on January 1, 1994; however, the implementation of such an agreement, along with his other neoliberal policies, allowed for the corporatization of narco-businesses.⁴² The access to land and infrastructure the neoliberal atmosphere generated allowed the Gulf Cartel to form its transnational company.⁴³

⁴⁰ United States, White House. Meeting with President Carlos Salinas of Mexico (1991), 1-2.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679099400?accountid=711>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴² This idea comes from two main sources: Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), 49 and *Organized Crime and Democratic Governability: Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* ed. John Bailey and Roy Godson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 184.

⁴³ Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas, Inc.*, 25.

Salinas' neoliberal policies facilitated the corporatization of narco-traffickers in several ways. Ironically, "one of the reasons to encourage Members to vote for NAFTA," a US Congressional report claimed, "was [it] would have a positive impact on drug trafficking between the United States and Mexico."⁴⁴ The irony is that neoliberal policies did have a positive impact on cartels; unfortunately, for Mexico and the United States, it positively benefited illicit trafficking as an industry rather than curbing it. The policies allowed narcos to undergo a corporatization process and grow their businesses at an alarming rate. For example, the privatization of land allowed "drug traffickers using their dirty money to buy vast amounts of land and businesses as far as 50 to 60 miles on each side of the border itself, creating what is, in effect, almost a trade free zone for drug trafficking, a free trade zone that they alone control," according to a US Congressional report.⁴⁵ Moreover, through the acquisition of territory, cartels gained access to *maquiladora* infrastructure—manufacturing warehouses along the border. These facilities received minimal inspections, providing smugglers staging areas to package and ship illicit goods.⁴⁶ This real-estate boom and corporatization process increased competition between cartels vying for the best trafficking routes. Since the Gulf Cartel controlled some of the most lucrative ports on the Texas-Mexico border, the organization developed

⁴⁴ U. S. Congress. Subcommittee on General Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Banking and Financial Services; Committee on Banking and Financial Services. "Money Laundering Activity Associated with the Mexican Narco-Crime Syndicate" Sep. 5, 1996 Committee on Banking and Financial Services Serial No. 104-72, 10. [HTTP://congressional.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1996-bfs-0028?accountid=7118](http://congressional.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1996-bfs-0028?accountid=7118).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁶ Boullosa and Wallace, *A Narco History*, 54.

its own corporate security, Los Zetas, who started the militarization of narcos. Consequently, Mexico has witnessed a severe increase in violence since NAFTA's implementation.

Another aspect of Salinas' neoliberal reforms aiding the growth of the drug industry deals with agriculture and labor. While it takes time to understand the impact of policies, NAFTA eventually opened Mexico up to large US agri-businesses. Many small Mexican farming operations were forced into growing illicit crops in order to survive, or these farmers left rural areas altogether and moved to border towns seeking more lucrative opportunities, which often meant entering the drug industry.⁴⁷ Therefore, narco-trafficking CEOs took advantage of an increasing labor pool along with expanding their production operations. Additionally, the vibrant highway infrastructure established through neoliberal policies helped cartels ship their products from rural Mexican farms to US markets.⁴⁸ Illicit crops were now easily transported to the border, packaged, and distributed throughout the United States in the same manner as many legal products.

Since the implications of Salinas' reforms were not entirely understood at the time, it was only after he left office did the extent of narco-corporatization begin to emerge. Before the US Congressional House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, retired Drug Enforcement Agent and former Director of the El Paso Intelligence Center, Phillip Jordan testified in 2000, "The drug black

⁴⁷ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Chad C. Serena, *Mexico is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations* (Washington D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2014), 24.

⁴⁸ Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*, 49.

market is no longer a marginal part of Mexico, but has become the very foundation which supports the Mexican Government.”⁴⁹ Jordan’s testimony came only six years after the implementation of NAFTA, and he expresses clear concern for the speed with which drug traffickers grew in power and influence. Ultimately, Salinas’ administration is remembered for neoliberal policies that increased inequality and facilitated the corporatization of organized crime.

Close to Corruption: Officials and Family

Salinas’ administration was marred with corruption. Several high level officials close to Salinas possessed strong connections to drug trafficking organizations. In Mexico, “The idea is commonly held that benefiting from one’s position in private industry or government is part of the ‘Fringe Benefits’ that come with the position... Only the most blatant cases attract the attention of the media and the general public,” one US Embassy report claimed.⁵⁰ Many consider corruption an active component of Mexican politics that one must navigate. Some individuals even knew that Raúl Salinas Lozano, President Salinas’ father, was linked to Gulf Cartel leader Juan García Ábrego.⁵¹

⁴⁹ United States Congress House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources. *United States-Mexico Counternarcotics Efforts* (2000), 70.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679099356?accountid=711>.

⁵⁰ United, States Embassy. *Narcotics Corruption in Mexico* (1993), 3-4.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679100343?accountid=711>.

⁵¹ United, States Embassy. *Mexico: Leak of Documents in U.S. Ruiz Massieu Case Cause Furor* (1997), 5.

By the time Salinas became president, a partnership between organized crime and key officials was already in place, yet Salinas made the decision to build his administration with them. The most notable of these corrupt individuals were Guillermo González Calderoni and the president's own brother, Raúl Salinas de Gortari.

First, Guillermo González Calderoni, a former commander of the Mexican Judicial Federal Police Anti-Drug Division, was a powerful individual who almost openly developed close relationships between government and narcos. Highly decorated US Drug Enforcement Agents, Hector Berrellez and Phillip Jordan, spoke favorably of González Calderoni for his contributions as a Mexican drug enforcement officer despite his known corruption. Besides his notable arrest of drug kingpin Miguel Félix Gallardo, Jordan explains, "Every agent that worked with [González Calderoni], regardless of his corruption, knew that he single-handedly opened a lot of doors for us to get to the murderers and torturers of [DEA agent] Kiki Camarena. He was a colleague, the s.o.b."⁵² Berrellez and Jordan's singular focus on how González Calderoni helped them should not mitigate the horrific and corrupt deeds he committed. González Calderoni left his mark on the criminal underworld when he took five million dollars from Amado Carrillo Fuentes for murdering his rival, Pablo Acosta, for territory in 1987. Nor should their

<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679113461?accountid=711>.

⁵² "Mexican Drug Agent Crossed the Line Once Too Often" *New York Times* (February 18, 2003).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/18/world/mexican-drug-agent-crossed-the-line-once-too-often.html>.

belief in him negate the fact that the brother of his childhood friend, Juan García Ábrego, became the leader of the Gulf Cartel and closely associated to the Salinas family.⁵³

Eventually, playing a dangerous game with corrupt officials and narcos caught up with González Calderoni. He resigned his position in 1992, and then later fled to the United States for fear of being assassinated. At which point, González Calderoni became an informant for US drug agencies.⁵⁴ The Mexican government attempted to extradite González Calderoni on charges of “torture, abuse of authority, smuggling, and illicit enrichment,” according to a US Consulate report, but it never produced sufficient evidence to force the US Department of Justice to comply.⁵⁵ Ultimately, however, González Calderoni, after nearly a decade of accusations against the Salinas administration, was gunned down outside his lawyer’s office in McAllen, Texas in 2003. González Calderoni was just one of many Salinas officials who were linked to drug trafficking, so some people still argue Salinas did not know anything about criminal activities. The corruption case of Salinas’ brother, however, makes it harder to deny his involvement.

Raúl Salinas remains a controversial figure in Mexican politics. Throughout his brother’s presidency, his connection with drug trafficking was unclear. Many individuals knew of a certain level of corruption within the administration because of President

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ United States, Consulate General. Post Reporting Plan no. 162: Matamoros Bi-Weekly Report (September 14, 1994-September 28, 1994), 5.
<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679099787?accountid=711>.

⁵⁵ United States Embassy, Mexico Monthly Narcotics Report (May 1994), 7.

Salinas' firing and arresting of several thousand employees, which gave the perception of him combating corruption, but the evidence implicating his brother never surfaced while in office. As such, Raúl Salinas appeared as just another member of the ruling class who received a government salary of \$192,000 per year.⁵⁶ It was later discovered that Raúl Salinas accumulated much more wealth than his salary permitted. "Mr. Salinas was able to transfer \$90 million to \$100 million between 1992 and 1994," according to the US General Accounting Office, "by using a private banking relationship formed by Citibank New York in 1992."⁵⁷ This revelation implicating Raúl Salinas with involvement in the drug industry and money laundering was only revealed after his brother left office

On February 28, 1995, Raúl Salinas was arrested in connection to the murder of his former brother-in-law and secretary general of the PRI, Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and for illicit enrichment from money laundering because of his narco-business.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Citibank, the financial institution the president's brother used, put an alert on Raúl Salinas' accounts, which led to the November 1995 arrest of his wife, Patricia Paulina Rios Castañón de Salinas, in Switzerland for attempting to withdrawal the funds. The US General Accounting Office conducted an investigation with the help of Citibank and issued a report detailing Raúl Salinas' money laundering structure. The report finds,

⁵⁶ Grillo, *El Narco*, 84.

⁵⁷ United States General Accounting Office. Private Banking: Raúl Salinas, Citibank, and Alleged Money Laundering: Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate. (October 1998), 3. University of Texas at Austin Collections Deposit Library [microform] GA1.13:OSI-99-1.

⁵⁸ "Raúl Salinas libra 17 años de procesos penales (cronología)." *Aristegui Noticias*. <http://aristeguinoticias.com/0108/mexico/raul-salinas-libra-17-anos-de-procesos-penales-cronologia/>.

“Citibank made no attempt to investigate Mr. Salinas’s background.... Further, [Citibank] believed that the majority of Mr. Salinas’s wealth had resulted from the sale of a construction company yet knew no specifics about the sale.”⁵⁹ The financial institution did not do the proper due diligence before accepting Raúl Salinas as a client, which was yet another example of fringe benefits for being a member of the ruling class. In fact, Citibank allowed Salinas to establish a network of private banking accounts and various shell companies.⁶⁰ The financial institution established one principal shell company, Trocca, “primarily for secrecy, tax advantages, and facilitating the distribution of assets.... To further insulate Mr. Salinas’s connection to Trocca, Cititrust (Cayman) used three additional shell companies to function as Trocca’s board of directors,” the US accounting report concluded.⁶¹ From the preponderance of evidence leveled against Raúl Salinas, he was convicted in 1999 of masterminding murder and money laundering and sentenced to prison for 50 years.

Raúl Salinas’ conviction was believed to be a great first step towards ending impunity in Mexico; unfortunately, the victory was short-lived. In 2005, Raúl Salinas was released from Almoloya prison acquitted of the murder charges, but the courts initially left open the possibility of charging him for illicit enrichment. However, the future threat of more charges only delayed the inevitable when a family possesses as much power as

⁵⁹ United States General Accounting Office. Private Banking: Raúl Salinas, Citibank, and Alleged Money Laundering: Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate. (October 1998), 17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: On pages 7 and 10 graphs illustrate the network of bank accounts and how transfers disguised the drug money.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

the Salinas family; Mexican authorities dropped the threat of all future charges against Raúl Salinas in 2013.⁶² Throughout the entire scandalous episode, the Salinas family denied every accusation, and they used their power and influence to secure Raúl's freedom even though the family's connection to the Gulf Cartel is now well known.

Through the guise of modernizing Mexico and fighting corruption, the Salinas administration bolstered connections with organized crime, allowing these criminal groups to undergo a corporatization process. Due to Salinas' neoliberal policies, particularly NAFTA, and government impunity, drug trafficking organizations have established relative narco-states in various parts of Mexico. However, concrete evidence implicating Carlos Salinas to the multitude of corruption scandals has yet to emerge. Some documents remain closed to the public while those released still have large sections blacked out. One US embassy report alludes to Carlos Salinas having direct involvement with narco-business, but the entire page remains classified.⁶³ Eventually, the story will emerge, and scholars will no longer have to depend on tangential linkages between other corrupt officials, drug traffickers, and Carlos Salinas himself. Until more documents become declassified, Carlos Salinas' involvement remains a mystery. Nonetheless, the neoliberal policies facilitated the corporatization of cartels, which spurred the rise of Los Zetas and the militarization of criminal groups.

⁶² "Raúl Salinas libra 17 años de procesos penales (cronología)."

⁶³ In "United States Embassy: New Allegations Against Raúl Salinas 1999," Page 7 alludes to Carlos Salinas having direct interactions with narco-corruption, but the information on page 8 remains classified, which leaves only speculation to the extent of his actual involvement.

Chapter 2: The Rise of Los Zetas

On August 24, 2010, bleeding from a gunshot, an Ecuadorian migrant made his way to a checkpoint in San Fernando, Tamaulipas seeking medical assistance. The terrified survivor told authorities he had escaped a nearby ranch, where he was held with dozens of others who were kidnapped after crossing Mexico's southern border. After a deadly battle with an unknown number of gunmen, authorities discovered the horrific scene of 72 migrants—58 men and 14 women—from Central and South America massacred in a room with the bodies piled on top of each other.⁶⁴ According to the survivor, the assailants killed the migrants because they refused to pay any ransom or work as assassins.⁶⁵ This type of extortion has been crafted for nearly two decades by the perpetrators of this massacre—Los Zetas—one of Mexico's deadliest drug cartels.

Since the corporatization of cartels during the Salinas administration, the battle for territory and resources has increased between the various criminal groups. This power struggle gave birth to a more violent and militarized group. At the forefront of this brutal violence was Los Zetas: a paramilitary organization originally recruited to work corporate security and protection for the Gulf Cartel. The new group caused Mexico's border states to be inundated with violence.⁶⁶ Journalist Ioan Grillo argues that Los Zetas

⁶⁴ Giving the victims a voice, a group of activists gathered information and created 72migrantes.com, which was compiled into a book: Guillermprieto, Alma ed. *72 Migrantes*. Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca: Almadía, 2011.

⁶⁵ Tuckman, Jo. "Survivor tells of escape from Mexican massacre in which 72 were left dead." *The Guardian*. 25 August 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/25/mexico-massacre-central-american-migrants>.

⁶⁶ George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 107.

are a “psychopathic criminal army that has broken all the rules in Mexico.”⁶⁷ By breaking all the rules, Los Zetas created a new corporate-military model for cartel operations. Los Zetas adapted the corporate model to include military tactics and strategies, which forced rivals and the government to adapt as well, resulting in a drastic increase in the level of violence in Mexico.

The reasons for violence are well studied. Sociologist Randall Collins has spent his career researching violence and its existence. One of his prominent books, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*, argues that violence is not an easy thing to commit. Furthermore, if and when violence is committed, it is not typically done with any degree of competency. Collins explains that violence is caused by circumstance, such as narco-trafficking. He states, for example, “Drug business violence occurs because the activities of an illegal business are not regulated by law.”⁶⁸ Violence for narcos is a method of governing and regulating the industry and competing against one’s business adversaries. However, he acknowledges the existence of a select few who have the capacity for violence, and, according to Collins, “the violent few are those who use this emotional field to their advantage.”⁶⁹ It is within this latter category of violence that Los Zetas fall under, and their uniquely brutal competency is the key cause for Mexico’s rising levels of violence. Even after their decline since 2012, the corporate-military model Los Zetas created is still very much alive and well.

⁶⁷ Grillo, *El Narco*, 253.

⁶⁸ Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 359.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

Los Zetas early on attained an unparalleled success in the drug trade by “establishing themselves as the most violent, destructive, and lethal participant in that industry.”⁷⁰ Los Zetas employed fear and intimidation to achieve their means, but, unlike other cartels, they did not hesitate to torture or slaughter anyone who stood in their way.⁷¹ This eagerness to engage in violence caused the Mexican Defense Ministry, in 2003, to classify the group “as the most formidable death squad to have worked for organized crime in Mexican history.”⁷² However, Los Zetas were not satisfied simply being a death squad, and it would eventually rise to become a formidable cartel in its own right.⁷³ In states such as Tamaulipas, Los Zetas became a primary source of employment.⁷⁴ With the increased brutality and the massive scale in which Los Zetas operated, rivals faced an intimidating adversary.

Although Los Zetas are not the first paramilitary group, they are innovators when it comes to the military tactics being deployed by organized crime today.⁷⁵ They elevated the standard for cartel operations; rivals were forced to match the level of brutality and violence or submit to Los Zetas.⁷⁶ This overt challenge to traditional cartels forced an

⁷⁰ Hal Brands, “Los Zetas: Inside Mexico’s Most Dangerous Drug Gang,” *Air & Space Power Journal*- Español Tercero Trimestre 2009, 1 de octubre de 2009, <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2009/3tri09/brandseng.htm>.

⁷¹ Grayson, *Mexico*, 31.

⁷² Samuel Logan, “The Evolution of ‘Los Zetas,’ a Mexican Crime Organization.” *Mexidata.info*, Mar. 16, 2009. <http://mexidata.info/id2194.html>.

⁷³ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner’s Men*, 196.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁵ Logan, “The Evolution of ‘Los Zetas,’ a Mexican Crime Organization.”

⁷⁶ Samuel Logan, “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, Feb. 16, 2012.

arms race for more sophisticated weaponry and the militarization of the drug industry.⁷⁷ Therefore, birthed out of the corporatization process with the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas caused another evolutionary shift in the drug industry—militarization—creating their own leaner, more savage form of doing business.⁷⁸

Los Zetas' new corporate-military model of operating fashioned a criminal brand of extreme violence. For example, the infamous Zeta tactic of decapitation was nearly nonexistent previously in Mexico's drug war.⁷⁹ Journalist Samuel Logan explains the Zeta brand:

This criminal brand marked a historical benchmark in Mexico as a time when the old school of a 'gentleman' drug lord, who would avoid bloodshed in the streets and only sell drugs away from children, was over, and the beginning of the new school young drug lords who favored violence over discretion, had begun.⁸⁰

Rivals were forced to adopt violence if they wished to compete against Los Zetas. Cartels could no longer simply focus on profits from drug smuggling; they had to partake “in the kind of butchery associated with the paramilitaries.”⁸¹ Interestingly, it was not only other cartels that would adjust to the threat of Los Zetas but also the government. Because of

<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-los-zetas-mexicos-second-most-powerful-drug-cartel>, 2.

⁷⁷ David A. Kuhn and Robert J. Bunker, “Just where do Mexican cartel weapons come from?,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22:5, 807-834 (2011): 808 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.620815>.

⁷⁸ Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica: War Along the Borderline*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 34-5.

⁷⁹ Grillo, *El Narco*, 106.

⁸⁰ Samuel Logan, “Preface: Los Zetas and a new barbarism,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22:5, 718-727 (2011): 720. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.620809>.

⁸¹ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 117.

this new level of violence, Mexican security services and rival cartels saw Los Zetas as a plague in need of eradication.⁸²

Origins

Los Zetas emerged in 1997, when the new leader of the Gulf Cartel Osiel Cárdenas Guillen, who took over after Juan García Ábrego's arrest, decided he needed superior protection. A cocaine induced paranoia caused him to believe assassins were going to kill him.⁸³ This delusion led Cárdenas to recruit highly trained soldiers from Mexico's *Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFE)—an “elite airborne Special Forces who are trained for the purposes of locating and apprehending drug cartel members.”⁸⁴ In the beginning, Cárdenas used his private soldiers for defense from his enemies. However, after solidifying his place of power, Cárdenas broadened Los Zetas' purview to debt collection, securing supply lines, settling discontent, and executing enemies with grotesque savagery.⁸⁵ The well-trained fighters gained prominence and power by “branding a new style of violence,” and militarizing the drug trade.⁸⁶

Cárdenas sought after the strongest recruits, who brought superior military training and knowledge to the cartel. Cárdenas' first recruit was Arturo ‘Z-1’ Guzmán Decena. He was the one indispensable recruit for Cárdenas because he convinced at least

⁸² Grillo, *El Narco*, 128.

⁸³ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 5.

⁸⁴ Lisa J. Campbell, “Los Zetas: operational assessment,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21:1, 55-80 (2010): 56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592310903561429>.

⁸⁵ Grayson, *Mexico*, 180.

⁸⁶ Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica: War Along the Borderline*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 304.

31 additional elite soldiers to fall under his command.⁸⁷ With a strong foundation, Guzmán ordered the original 31 defectors to recruit and train ten other men in their elite military tactics.⁸⁸ Los Zetas' founding resembles the military more than any traditional criminal group.

After Guzmán's death in 2002, Heriberto Lazcano and Miguel Treviño Morales took over. The two leaders came from different backgrounds and thus operated in a very different manner. Lazcano rose from a position of military obscurity.⁸⁹ As a former GAFE, Lazcano preferred to blend in with the population, and he was a strong military strategist who emphasized methodical training and recruiting.⁹⁰ Lazcano earned a reputation for unmatched ferocity and courage in violent altercations.⁹¹ Conversely, the ex-Nuevo Laredo police officer, Treviño Morales represented a brash, sadistic leader.⁹² Moreover, he built "a reputation for extreme brutality—a man who really 'gets off' on delivering beastly coups de grâce."⁹³ Even though the two Zetas are considered as contrasting figures, they transformed the organization from a private corporate security force into a terrifying and formidable cartel.

⁸⁷ Logan, "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel."

⁸⁸ Logan, "The Evolution of 'Los Zetas,' a Mexican Crime Organization."

⁸⁹ Albert De Amicis, "Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs)," MPPM Thesis, University of Pittsburgh Graduate School for Public and International Affairs, November 27, 2010. Updated: March 12, 2011. 2.

⁹⁰ Logan, "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel."

⁹¹ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 13.

⁹² Logan, "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel."

⁹³ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 26.

Tactics and Strategies

With a willingness to battle anyone, anytime, and anywhere, training became an essential component to Los Zetas' survival. As Los Zetas expanded and grew in power, their emphasis on organization and training ensured their superiority over a growing list of adversaries.⁹⁴ Los Zetas' training breaks down into two parts: military and zeta training.

The original Zetas deserted from elite Special Forces units, so they came highly trained and disciplined. Before their defection, France's National Police Intervention Group instructed some Zetas on the use of special weapons and counterterrorism in preparation for the 1986 World Cup held in Mexico City.⁹⁵ Several other Zetas received training from special operation experts from the United States, Israel, and France at the controversial School of Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.⁹⁶ With distinct specialized training, Los Zetas were well versed in elite military tactics, such as rapid deployment, counter-surveillance, psychological warfare, and much more.⁹⁷ The group's military training made them terrifying yet also awe-inspiring.

If Los Zetas' original training was not disturbing enough, the group gained more military expertise with the recruitment of Kaibiles from Guatemala. As the anti-guerrilla unit from the Guatemalan dirty war, Kaibiles were highly trained killers. Massacring tens of thousands so-called insurgents compared to the Mexican army's hundreds, the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁶ De Amicis, "Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs)," 1.

⁹⁷ Grayson, *Mexico*, 183-4.

brutality of Kaibiles makes Mexican soldiers look like alter boys.⁹⁸ According to one Kaibil, who testified before the Guatemalan Truth Commission, “*Kaibil* is a mix of the experiences of the United States Rangers, Columbian *lanceros*, Peruvian commandos, Chilean commandos. These approaches were combined and formed as a model adapted to our situation, the *Kaibil* course.”⁹⁹ And, their situation during the civil war was brutality. Tapping into primal human instinct through a dehumanizing process, Kaibiles fostered maximum aggression. For instance, it was required that they slaughter animals, eat them raw or cooked, and drink the blood to prove their mettle.¹⁰⁰ This dehumanization process led survivors of Kaibil assaults to believe demons attacked them.¹⁰¹ With advanced military training and a reputation for extreme violence, the defection of Kaibiles constituted a significant plus for Los Zetas in maintaining an elite military force.

As an organization constructed from a military background, Los Zetas set up a method to disseminate their knowledge to new recruits. Lazcano first established a clandestine recruitment channel using his military contacts and developed training camps for new recruits to learn basic tactics, weaponry, and communications.¹⁰² As the consummate military man, Lazcano developed an elite training ground for his narco-

⁹⁸ Grillo, *El Narco*, 105.

⁹⁹ Daniel Rothenberg, ed. *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan in the United States—a division of St. Martin’s Press LLC. (2012), 103-4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰¹ Logan, “Preface: Los Zetas and a new barbarism.”

¹⁰² Logan, “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel.”

recruits where Zetas would instruct plebes for on average six months.¹⁰³ Cadets would be in formation at 0600 dressed in military fatigues ready to partake in physical training, surveillance and counter surveillance, and combat skills.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Los Zetas had the Kaibiles instruct recruits at a camp north of Guatemala City known as “The Hell.”¹⁰⁵ Besides learning the elite tactics from ex-Special Forces, Zeta recruits were instructed in the use of a variety of weapons, such as AR-15s, AK-47s, grenade launchers, helicopters, and more.¹⁰⁶ Lacking traditional military discipline, however, but equipped with specialized violent training, compared to the original defectors, Zeta recruits “are considered to be of a more brutal mindset.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Los Zetas established themselves as an armed force first then a business rather than the traditional cartel way of establishing the business then using force to protect it. Many consider the group’s tactical warfare its most valuable asset.¹⁰⁸

Recruitment and corruption were essential. Not just anyone could be a Zeta, but not just Zetas were needed for an organization of this magnitude. Los Zetas always searched for new recruits, preferably corruptible youth at ease with violence and willing

¹⁰³ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner’s Men*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁵ Grayson, *Mexico*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ George W. Grayson, “Los Zetas: the Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (May 2008): 2. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Lisa J. Campbell, “Los Zetas: operational assessment,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21:1, 55-80 (2010): 68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592310903561429>.

¹⁰⁸ De Amicis, “Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs),” 14.

potential killers.¹⁰⁹ Seeking out young, impressionable recruits almost guarantees that Los Zetas' violent indoctrination took root. Further, establishing US connections was essential, so Los Zetas forged alliances with US gangs.¹¹⁰ Basically, inequality and institutional failures in Mexico led to systemic corruption and allowed Los Zetas to recruit many individuals.¹¹¹

When it comes to corruption, Los Zetas were among the most efficient. Because of the institutional shortcomings yet providing the business infrastructure in the border region, Los Zetas became adept in the art of corrupting law-enforcement and political officials.¹¹² In 2005, corruption became so pervasive in Los Zetas' main operating hub, Nuevo Laredo, that only 150 out of 700 police officers reported for duty after federal officials conducted an audit.¹¹³ Roughly 15% of cartel profits went towards the corruption of government officials, and those who do not comply "disappeared."¹¹⁴ Los Zetas, therefore, raised the bar on the traditional cartel ideology of *plata o plomo*, silver or lead, with vicious ferocity.¹¹⁵ According to former Zeta operative, Hector Moreno, "When the Zetas arrived, they recruited everyone to work for them," and those who

¹⁰⁹ Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 71.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹¹ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹¹² De Amicis, "Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs)," 11

¹¹³ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹¹⁴ Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 68.

¹¹⁵ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 77.

refused were killed.¹¹⁶ Los Zetas' violent tactics made their recruitment and corruption operations extremely successful.

Los Zetas made a name for themselves through the usage of violent military tactics when dealing with rivals. For example, police used to extort criminals for protection, but, with Los Zetas, this was no longer the case.¹¹⁷ The criminal organization had no patience for antagonists. Not to say other criminal insurgent groups did not react violently to authorities, but Los Zetas' tactics far surpassed other armed organization in relation to their enthusiasm for violence—that is, the use of high-caliber weapons in acts of grotesque torture and mass killings with military precision.¹¹⁸ Los Zetas frequently plunged enemies into vats of acid, beheaded them, castrated them, and dismembered them while still alive as warnings to their rivals.¹¹⁹ The use of these tactics instilled fear throughout the organization's territories and was a part of a larger strategic goal to solidify control.

Los Zetas infiltrated installations using disguises and coordinate media suppression. They ran a covert operation in 2007 impersonating soldiers conducting a routine weapons check at two police stations, murdering seven government officials. Even more brazen, disguised as SWAT team members in Phoenix, Arizona, a group of

¹¹⁶ Ginger Thompson, "How the U.S. Triggered a Massacre in Mexico," *ProPublica*. June 12, 2017. <https://www.propublica.org/article/allende-zetas-cartel-massacre-and-the-us-dea#>.

¹¹⁷ Grillo, *El Narco*, 103.

¹¹⁸ Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 65.

¹¹⁹ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 70.

Zetas killed a rival trafficker and engaged in a firefight with authorities.¹²⁰ Unfortunately, with each successful operation, Los Zetas only became more embolden and violent, and the implementation of these tactics illustrate the group's overarching military strategy of seizing power through psychological operations (PSYOPS).

An effective military tool, Los Zetas acquired understanding of PSYOPS during the original Zetas' and Kaibiles' Special Forces training. The School of Americas handbook describes how to properly utilize PSYOPS. For example, it explains proper utilization of violence against individuals and their families when extracting information.¹²¹ PSYOPS became an instrumental tool for the criminal organization to seize power and control over narco-territories. One well-publicized operation occurred on June 8, 2005. On that day, Los Zetas killed Nuevo Laredo police chief, Alejandro Domínguez Coello, with 30 bullets only six hours after he took office because he publically refused to compromise his principles.¹²² The audacity of this murder demonstrates that human life held little to no value to the criminal group outside of being a Zeta.

Los Zetas' PSYOPS went far beyond generating fear amongst authorities and rival narcos. For the vast majority of individuals, the name Los Zetas "has become an evil talisman, and to avoid uttering it is a primal act of superstition."¹²³ Two excellent reasons for this sentiment were Los Zetas' torture and kidnapping trades. First, Los Zetas

¹²⁰ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹²¹ Grillo, *El Narco*, 96.

¹²² Grayson, "Los Zetas: the Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel," 1.

¹²³ Vulliamy, *Amexica*, 244.

preferred creativity in the usage of torture tools. Tools consisted of blowtorches, carpenters' planes, knives, tourniquets, and electricity.¹²⁴ Sadly, this list is not an exhaustive one of the artistic violence Zetas used to torture victims. Second, Los Zetas ran an efficient, yet brutal, kidnapping business. In many cases, Los Zetas lured migrants into Mexico across the country's southern border "with false employment and migration offerings through the use of website advertisements."¹²⁵ Once in Mexico, they would kidnap and attempt to extort the migrants. Unfortunately, nothing always goes according to plan. As mentioned, in 2010, the world became keenly aware of Los Zetas' brutal mass kidnappings because of the San Fernando massacre, where 72 migrants were found executed.¹²⁶ While other narcos have used torture and kidnapping before Los Zetas, it was the organization's mastery of PSYOPS and military precision that set them apart from the rest. The genius behind Los Zetas' strategy was the group's use of media to publicize their violent power grab—both through traditional and new media outlets.

Los Zetas cornered the market in narco-publicity, using the exposure to increase the effectiveness PSYOPS. Plenty of the grotesque and gruesome acts were exhibited on a variety of media outlets. Los Zetas were eager to promote their PSYOPS campaign via new and old media conduits. They bathed the public in fear promulgating the Zeta brand through YouTube, narco-banners, narco-corridos, messages left on and around corpses, etc.¹²⁷ One YouTube example that Los Zetas posted was of the headless bodies of eight

¹²⁴ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 90.

¹²⁵ Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 68.

¹²⁶ Grillo, *El Narco*, 268.

¹²⁷ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 112.

soldiers they killed in the state of Guerrero.¹²⁸ Another was a prison break of fifty-three inmates in Zacatecas, on May 16, 2009.¹²⁹ These are two prime examples of Los Zetas utilizing new forms of media to their advantage, but one of their more effective ways the organization promoted its PSYOPS strategy was through the convergence of old and new media outlets.¹³⁰

Narcomantas, or public banners, represented the backbone of Los Zetas' PSYOPS efforts. These low-tech messages were extremely effective because of the merging between old and new media, and the banners were often guarded by "a decapitated head or quartered remains."¹³¹ One recruitment banner read:

Operative group "Los Zetas" wants you, military or ex-military. We offer good salary, food and attention to your family and do not suffer abuse and not suffer hunger. We won't feed you Maruchan soups. If you are not serious, then refrain from calling. Interested contact Tel: 867-168-7423.¹³²

¹²⁸ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹²⁹ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 73.

¹³⁰ A link to two execution videos (warning: very graphic): one video is of a Zeta killing a woman, and the other is the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, or *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) and Matazetas, decapitating and cutting off the arms of a man hanging upside down. These videos show Zetas' PSYOPS strategy, and a newly formed rival group employing it as well. "Executions: Zetas Decapitate Woman- Aliados Executes CJNG Member." *Borderlandbeat.com*, 28 April 2013.
<http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2013/04/execution-videos-zetas-decapitate-woman.html>.

¹³¹ Logan, "Preface: Los Zetas and a new barbarism," 723.

¹³² Original text: Grupo operative "Los Zetas" Te quiere a ti, military o ex-militar. Te ofrecemos buen sueldo, comida y atenciones a tu familia ya no sufras maltratos y no sufras hambre. Nostros no te damos de comer sopas maruchan Relajes absténganse de llamar. Interesados comunicarse Tel: 867-168-7423. "Los Zetas buscan apropiarse de las rutas de occidente y Tela-Omoa." *Laprensa.hn*. Redacción: redaccion@laprensa.hn Miércoles 03 de agosto de 2011.
<http://www.laprensa.hn/Publicaciones/Series-de-Investigacion/Los-Zetas-en-Centroamerica/Los-Zetas-buscan-apropiarse-de-las-rutas-de-occidente-y-Tela-Omoa#panel1-1>.

Los Zetas knew that the military receives poor wages, treatment, and food in Mexico, so this banner called for recruitment of well-trained individuals, soldier to soldier. When the banner references Maruchan soups, the ex-military Zetas were referring to a cheap bland noodle soup that soldiers had to eat, and the criminal groups was offering better opportunity for any disgruntled troop.¹³³ By offering better wages and treatment to Zeta members, the banner illustrates a desire, at least on some level, for the criminal organization to keep morale high within its ranks.

Los Zetas subscribed to the *Esprit de Corps* philosophy to promote loyalty and unity. Typically, this philosophy is used within militaries and is rarely practiced in criminal organizations.¹³⁴ Yet, with a military background, Los Zetas preferred the doctrine and implemented it in a variety of ways, such as earnings, amenities, prison breaks, body recovery, honoring the dead, and occultism. Narcos often earned three times the amount they would in the military.¹³⁵ Moreover, loyalty is another large aspect of this philosophy, so Zetas were willing to risk capture or death to honor or recover their dead. For instance, after the death of Guzmán Decena (Z-1) in 2002, flower arrangements were placed at his grave with the inscription: “We will always keep you in our hearts: from

¹³³ Grayson, *Mexico*, 184.

¹³⁴ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 83.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

your family, Los Zetas.”¹³⁶ Moreover, after Lazcano’s (Z-40) reported dead in October 2012, a group of armed men went to the funeral home and recovered the body.¹³⁷

Los Zetas were violent and intelligent businessmen. First, to control the mass groups of kidnapped migrants, they utilized a method of torture they called *tablear*, which consists of Zetas striking victims in the lower back with a wooden board.¹³⁸ This technique worked twofold in suppressing those kidnapped because it weakened victims and it instilled fear of worse things to come for any disobedience. Second, in 2009, Los Zetas were discovered stealing oil from *Petróleos Mexicanos* or Pemex. Authorities discovered that Los Zetas used high-tech drills to tap into oil pipelines, and they then transported and sold the product throughout northern Mexico and occasionally in Texas.¹³⁹ Clearly, by diversifying their business to include kidnapping, extortion, and hydrocarbons, Los Zetas were changing the way cartels operated with a more corporate and militarized model. By fostering this new deadly business template, Zeta rivals were forced to adapt.

The rapid ascension to the top of the Mexican drug trade, along with their extreme brutality, contributed to the formation of Los Zetas as a criminal brand. Anthropologist Howard Campbell states, “Surrounding this organization is a larger than life myth, a sort

¹³⁶ Grayson, “Los Zetas: the Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel,” 3.

¹³⁷ Will Grant, “Six moments in the Calderon presidency.” *BBCNews, Mexico City*. Nov. 30, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-20554834>.

¹³⁸ Grillo, *El Narco*, 267.

¹³⁹ Grillo, *El Narco*, 272.

of Zeta brand name that some criminals use just to scare their targets.”¹⁴⁰ This brand name expedites the development of new recruits. Criminals understand that the name Zeta represents power and respect through violence.¹⁴¹

A large factor in Los Zetas becoming a criminal brand was how they operated. Both the organization’s military background and control of territories contributed to the cartel’s brand. First, Los Zetas developed their own insignias “an encircled ‘Z’ on khaki shirts, or a ‘Z’ tattoo on upper biceps.”¹⁴² Moreover, in a quite literal sense, some recruits were branded with a “Z” after successful completion of training.¹⁴³ The “Z” insignia promoted easy name brand recognition for Los Zetas in the same way formal businesses, such as Nike or McDonald’s, use symbols for everyone to identify and understand quickly. Once Zeta training was complete, as with any job, the employee was ready for placement in his or her location. Therefore, Los Zetas adopted the corporate model of formal businesses similar to McDonald’s: “As with McDonald’s, local recruits get training and the best brand name in the business.”¹⁴⁴ However, unlike the fast food chain, Los Zetas, as a business, operated more like a large holding company overseeing various subsidiaries rather than an independent franchise model. Lastly, the truly remarkable way Los Zetas created its brand was through contraband, which could be identified by the cartel’s logo. Los Zetas bootlegged movies and music to sell at flea markets with

¹⁴⁰ Logan, “The Evolution of ‘Los Zetas,’ a Mexican Crime Organization.”

¹⁴¹ Grillo, *El Narco*, 104.

¹⁴² Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner’s Men*, 35.

¹⁴³ Campbell, “Los Zetas: operational assessment,” 69.

¹⁴⁴ Grillo, *El Narco*, 105.

“PRODUCCIONES ZETA in blue letters in the top left-hand corner.”¹⁴⁵ Los Zetas went to great lengths to establish its criminal brand, so the organization did not tolerate anyone who attempted to benefit from falsely using the Zeta name.

Los Zetas, as would any company, frowned upon any perceived copyright infringement because it devalued the brand. The group’s criminal brand was a special kind of brutality and fear. Zetas were so effective at getting what they wanted because of the fear the “Z” conjured in their enemies. However, the success of developing such a criminal brand through psychological warfare encouraged copycats, known as McZetas, attempting to capitalize and profit from using the violent Zeta name.¹⁴⁶ Would-be criminals invoked Los Zetas’ brand because they recognized that it could facilitate accomplishing tasks without much trouble. True Zetas abhorred McZetas. For example, in 2008, a man in Monterrey was discovered viciously tortured and killed with a note reading: “This is one of those who carried out extortion by telephone trying to pass for ‘Z’.”¹⁴⁷ In another instant, two McZetas were murdered in Reynosa in 2009 with a note warning: “This is what will happen to those who attempt to pass themselves off as Zetas.”¹⁴⁸ Los Zetas went out of its way to maintain its criminal brand, which it created through violence and fear.

Enemies Adapting

¹⁴⁵ Grillo, *El Narco*, 269.

¹⁴⁶ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner’s Men*, 39.

¹⁴⁷ De Amicis, “Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs),” 19.

¹⁴⁸ Grayson, *Mexico*, 190.

Since the organization's inception, Los Zetas transformed the State of Mexico. According to Grayson and Logan, "'Zetanization' has influenced Mexico's landscape in various ways: in the tactics of rival cartels, in the reconfiguration of state and municipal security forces, and in media self-censorship."¹⁴⁹ And, as an unintended consequence, Los Zetas acquired an air of mystique as a cartel because of their willingness for grotesque levels of violence, which created public hysteria.¹⁵⁰ Because of this mythic image, rival narcos and security forces were forced to adjust in order to fight back against this evolving threat. Los Zetas even inspired the creation of various spin-off groups as well as inspiring the formation of other paramilitary groups such as *Los Pelones*, *Los Negros*, and *Las Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo*.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, on March 3, 2010, a number of cartels came to an accord over the need to eradicate Los Zetas known as the Fusion of Anti-Zeta Cartels (*Fusión de Cáteles Antizetas*—FCAZ).¹⁵² This accord was significant because the coalition agreed to match Zetas' level of violence, sparking the militarization of other cartels, and it united the two major cartels in a common goal of eradicating Los Zetas: the Sinaloa Cartel and the Gulf Cartel, both representing the original corporate model adapting to the new militarized business framework.

These new groups and alliances wasted no time developing Los Zetas' methods. For example, the *Fusión de Cáteles Antizetas* employed Zetas' media strategy by

¹⁴⁹ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 117.

¹⁵⁰ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 106.

creating YouTube videos threatening the extermination of its members.¹⁵³ These anti-Zetas attempted to fight violence with violence. Moreover, the FCAZ decided to embrace other Los Zetas' instruments for spreading fear: they publicized through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁵⁴ These actions illustrate that even though Los Zetas first honed and mastered fear as effective weapon, the organization's rivals were eager to develop their own basic PSYOPS programs.¹⁵⁵ Because of the level of brutality, the war between Los Zetas and anti-Zetas required a steady supply of soldiers.

Since the formation of Los Zetas and the militarization of the drug industry, military defection has become all but common in Mexico. Deplorable working conditions and low pay led to an estimated 150,000 desertions since 2000.¹⁵⁶ Because the demand for highly trained soldiers, "deserters include snipers, paratroopers, survival experts, intelligence analysts and rapid reaction specialists."¹⁵⁷ Thus, criminal organizations underwent an increase of well-trained recruits for the violent regulation of the illicit industry. Los Zetas turned Mexico into a war zone because the group's proclivity for brutality led others to follow, resulting in unprecedented levels of violence.

Even though the Sinaloa Cartel is considered the world's largest and strongest cartel, it was not impervious to Los Zetas' effects. The leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán, always operated the cartel in accordance with the

¹⁵³ Sylvia Longmire, *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan in the U.S.—a division of St. Martin's Press, 2011), 19.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 101-2.

¹⁵⁵ Logan, "Preface: Los Zetas and a new barbarism," 720.

¹⁵⁶ Brands, "Los Zetas: Inside Mexico's Most Dangerous Drug Gang."

¹⁵⁷ Kuhn and Bunker, "Just where do Mexican cartel weapons come from?," 820.

traditional business model. For example, El Chapo promoted the image of the Godfather, who supported community projects and job creation. Unfortunately, he felt compelled to employ gratuitous and grotesque violence.¹⁵⁸ All cartels have nefarious aspects and are willing to commit a certain level of violence, but El Chapo was largely a man said to not indulge in unnecessary brutality. Yet, when it comes to Los Zetas, El Chapo tended to be merciless. In response to Los Zetas, El Chapo and the Sinaloa Cartel established their own paramilitary force called *Los Pelones*.¹⁵⁹ The number one cartel in the world had now become even more menacing and violent.

Another cartel to emulate Los Zetas was the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, an affiliate of the Sinaloa Cartel. Recognizing the rising tide of violence Los Zetas created, the Beltrán Leyva Cartel felt the need to protect itself. Consequently, the organization created its paramilitary force known as *Las Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo* (FEDA, Special Forces of Arthur).¹⁶⁰ This paramilitary group originally formed to combat Los Zetas, which was evident when the cartel sent its *Mata Zetas*, or Zetas Killers, to purge Cancún.¹⁶¹ More importantly, FEDA adopted Los Zetas' tactic of posting YouTube videos to depict the torture and humiliation of Zeta members trying to strike fear within Los Zetas.¹⁶² Ironically, the Beltrán Leyva Cartel would switch allegiances from the Sinaloa Cartel to

¹⁵⁸ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 117.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶² Longmire, *Cartel*, 108-9.

align with Los Zetas, yet it was a new organization that emerged that replicated Los Zetas' model the most.

La Familia is an organization based out of Michoacán. It was not a coincidence that the new group derived its organizational structure from Los Zetas since Zetas trained its original members in guerrilla warfare in 2005 and 2006.¹⁶³ La Familia also adopted Los Zetas' other skillsets, such as castration, mutilation, PSYOPS, social media, etc.¹⁶⁴ One interesting example of La Familia's diversification is how the organization mines iron ore and sells it to Asia for chemicals to produce synthetic drugs. Learning the profitability of harvesting raw minerals from Los Zetas, La Familia conducts transnational trades to support other aspects of its business.¹⁶⁵ However, the new organization decided to break ties with Los Zetas in a violent way in 2006. Taking a page out of their predecessor's PSYOPS handbook, on September 6, 2006, La Familia made its first public statement by throwing five human heads onto the dance floor at a nightclub in Uruapan, Michoacan.¹⁶⁶ In an ironic move, La Familia deployed the furious military tactics taught to them against its former teachers. After breaking ties, La Familia established its own elaborate indoctrination campaign as part of their PSYOPS method.

La Familia uses a variety of indoctrination methods. First, and foremost, the group considers itself a faith-based organization. The group's first leader, Nazario

¹⁶³ Grillo, *El Narco*, 211.

¹⁶⁴ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 94.

¹⁶⁵ Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas, Inc.*, 172-73.

¹⁶⁶ De Amicis, "Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs)," 4.

Moreno Gonzalez developed a Bible for the cartel with personalized saying.¹⁶⁷ By establishing this religious component, the group sought to easily “control and intimidate La Familia’s membership.”¹⁶⁸ However, La Familia’s indoctrination did not stop with cartel members. The organization paid for full-page ads in local newspapers and published a manifesto pronouncing itself as an anti-crime group.¹⁶⁹ La Familia was claiming to be Michoacán’s savior against institutional failures and other organized criminal groups. With La Familia and other cartels undergoing militarization because of Los Zetas, the Mexican government was forced to adapt as well.

Since the corporatization and militarization of organized crime, marked by the rise of Los Zetas, the Mexican government has been trying to adapt and catch up. Many citizens consider these criminal groups to be more astute than the Mexican security forces.¹⁷⁰ This loss of public trust was one reason President Calderón made combating Los Zetas his highest priority while in office.¹⁷¹ After Calderón entered office, he deployed over 40,000 federal police and troops to battle narco-traffickers.¹⁷² Calderón was only reaffirming and expanding Mexico’s position on handling the drug trade that his predecessor, Vicente Fox, established. First, Project Sparta was developed to train elite soldiers, much in the same manner as the original Zetas, in counter-insurgency, urban

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Longmire, *Cartel*, 26.

¹⁷⁰ Campbell, “Los Zetas: operational assessment,” 55.

¹⁷¹ Grayson, *Mexico*, 192.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 119.

warfare, etc.¹⁷³ Another example of how the government was adapting because of Los Zetas was the Mexican military issuing heavy armored vehicles since Los Zetas introduced their version known as *El Monstruo*, or the Monster.¹⁷⁴ Unfortunately, Calderón's actions only seem to further militarize the narco-industry. Los Zetas' ability to cause its rivals and the Mexican government to change the way they each operate lends credence to the group as a modernizing force.

Los Zetas played an evolutionary role in the way cartels and the Mexican government engaged one another, resulting in extreme levels of violence. Through the group's corporate beginnings, brutality, and successful utilization of PSYOPS to embed fear among the public, Los Zetas ushered in a new model for conducting narco-business. The organization paved the way for other groups, and its unique brand of violence might be "the ultimate inspiration for postmodern criminal groups worldwide."¹⁷⁵ Los Zetas' willingness to use violence forced rivals and government security forces to adapt, which gave birth to a new era of unprecedented levels of violence in Mexico. Competition between Los Zetas and its rivals resulted in countless human rights violations. The violence also amongst these groups has caused splinter groups to form creating more competition and meaningless violence. While Los Zetas' power has deteriorated over the last few years, the group's corporate-military model remains.

¹⁷³ Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 127.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁵ Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 75.

Conclusion

Corporatization and militarization of organized crime created an epidemic of violence in Mexico. The Mexican government down plays the violence listing the death toll in a 2013 official report as an estimated 47,515 people being killed since 2006.¹⁷⁶ However, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, the death toll is estimated at 240,000 people since 2000 with another 26,000 still disappeared.¹⁷⁷ This drastic increase in violence is linked to the corporatization and militarization of cartels. Since the 1990s, organized crime in Mexico has become more and more diversified, militarized, and violent. Although many consider Los Zetas, as an organization, is in a decline since the death or arrest of their original members, the group's evolutionary influence remains. Old groups, such as the Gulf Cartel (i.e., Los Zetas' former employer), continue to adapt while new groups, such as Cartel Jalisco-New Generation, are adopting the Zeta corporate-military model.

The evidence for this model remains present in the high levels of violence in Mexico. In 2017, the country witnessed more than 29,000 homicides—the highest death toll since the peak of the war against Los Zetas in 2011.¹⁷⁸ In fact, though Los Zetas'

¹⁷⁶ Damien Cave, "Mexico Updates Death Toll in Drug War to 47,515, but Critics Dispute the Data," *The New York Times* (January 11, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/americas/mexico-updates-drug-war-death-toll-but-critics-dispute-data.html?_r=0.

¹⁷⁷ Brianna Lee, "Mexico's Drug War" *Council on Foreign Relations* (March 5, 2014), <http://www.cfr.org/mexico/mexicos-drug-war/p13689>.

¹⁷⁸ Associated Press and Reuters, "Drug Violence Blamed for Mexico's Record 29,168 Murders in 2017," *The Guardian* (Jan. 21, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/21/drug-violence-blamed-mexico-record-murders-2017>.

power has faded, the level of violence has only increased during President Peña Nieto's *sexenio* (2012-2018). Conversely, the United States is seeing a significant loss of life because of the drug problem, especially because of opioids. The Council on Foreign Relations documents, in 2016, that drug overdoses caused more than 59,000 deaths in the United States.¹⁷⁹ With so much death, Mexico and the United States must stop the hyperbolic rhetoric and political grandstanding simply for public consumption and instead come together to find nuanced solutions to the violence and the drug industry.

The NAFTA negotiations present an opportunity for both the United States and Mexico to discuss policies to reduce violence, addiction, inequality, and corruption. As the historical perspective showed, the impact of NAFTA and other neoliberal reforms played a huge role in allowing cartels to undergo corporatization, so the new negotiations must consider the consequences for each policy, intended and unintended. Both countries do not have the ability to solely focus on the formal economy. Moreover, because the illicit industry is transnational, requiring cooperation across borders, the United States and Mexico need to consider what is being exported from both countries, not just from Mexico. As such, Mexico needs to stop pushing to keep immigration, the drug trade, and border security out of the negotiations; whereas, the United States needs to stop using insulting language towards Mexico, which only serves to keep officials from the negotiation table. By limiting the negotiations to the formal economy, both nations refuse to learn from history and the impact of NAFTA on cartels.

¹⁷⁹ "Global Conflict Tracker," *Council on Foreign Relations* (Updated: April 3, 2018). <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/criminal-violence-in-mexico>.

Using the understanding of how the corporate-military cartel functions and how policies can play a dramatic role in strengthening organized crime, here are some suggestions that Mexico and the United States should consider while discussing a new trade deal. One objective of the deal should be to reduce the level of violence and obtain a ceasefire amongst criminal organizations. To move towards this goal, Mexico should encourage the United States to take a domestic focus—similar to the US rhetoric calling for Mexico to fix its problems. The US focus is twofold. First, the United States must make a concerted effort to prevent money and weapons from being exported to Mexico, which includes oversight of the gun and financial industries and better border checks for vehicles leaving the country. Additionally, another way to reduce organized crime profits is to prevent revenue from hydrocarbon trading and punish companies caught purchasing stolen minerals. Second, Mexico should also negotiate US domestic investment into prevention and rehabilitation as a long-term strategy to reduce the number of drug users. Executing these two US strategies will decrease cartels ability to build their arsenals with weapons coming from the United States.

Moreover, since the first round of neoliberal policies caused the corporatization of organized crime, the second round of negotiations needs to consider how to monitor business infrastructure on both side of the border. Better tracking of companies buying facilities and monitoring unused properties will make it more difficult for criminals to take advantage of resources. Beyond monitoring infrastructure, both nations must secure adequate opportunities and living wages for Mexican workers to help prevent laborers from seeking supplementary incomes in the illicit drug economy. More importantly,

understanding that informal economies and crime can never fully be eradicated, the two nations can reduce organized crime's power and influence over the long term. This reduction will be a long-term strategy of investment to strengthen the Mexican state throughout the country. Mexico must stop focusing primarily on the central government and invest in building infrastructure, job opportunities, and education throughout the nation and reduce inequality, which drives people into the drug trade.

The final suggestions, however, depict a more radical approach. First, the United States and Mexico should consider the legalization of marijuana. A majority of US states have legalized some form of marijuana's use, recreation or medical, and 64% of citizen support its legalization, according to a recent Gallop poll. There seems to be a slow steady change towards the drug's legalization, so both countries need to seriously consider expediting the process. Marijuana sells remain a large revenue stream for organized crime, and legalization would remove those profits and create new opportunities in the formal economy. Second, create a relationship with the Mexican poppy industry and US pharmaceutical companies. Going after opiates can also take away large amounts of revenue from cartels. While poppies are grown worldwide, many Mexican criminal groups take advantage of farmers' need to survive, so they grow poppies for drug traffickers to produce heroin. Since crop eradication does not work, negotiating the growing of Mexican poppies for sell to US pharmaceutical companies with strict oversight could reduce opioid profits going to organized crime. Additionally, dealing directly with large US companies will insure higher wages for farmers and bring them.

Tackling large societal challenges, such as combatting the drug trade, is a herculean task for any country. However, the United States and Mexico have the opportunity to reflect on the past to better understand to challenges, and, hopefully, they will provide nuanced policies. In order to achieve their goals, both countries must show humility and understand how each of them contributed to the proliferation of violence in Mexico. The suggestions this paper provides will not be easy, or even desired at times, to be achieved; they simply are meant to start a discussion. The execution remains in the hands of policymakers.

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