



**Evren CELIK WILTSE, PhD.**

*Assistant Professor at TOBB University of Economy and Technology,  
Political Science Department*

## STUCK BETWEEN POT AND PROSTITUTES: US FOREIGN POLICY IN LATIN AMERICA

In April of 2012, the heads of 33 countries in the Western hemisphere got together for the Sixth Summit of the Organization of American States (OAS). Previously, this platform was an opportunity for the US to flex its muscles in its so-called backyard. Lately however, it is becoming more of an embarrassment for the global superpower.

It started with the George W Bush administration. When G. W. Bush cut his trip short and left the 2005 summit early, mainstream pundits in the US interpreted this as a row between the US president and his arch nemesis, Hugo Chavez.

Unfortunately, hemispheric relations did not seem to have improved much, despite the change of teams in the White House. The latest OAS Summit in Cartagena, Columbia was hardly a warm rapprochement between the US and Latin America.

Firstly, before even the US President set foot on Cartagena, his visit was marred by a sex scandal involving his Secret Service agents. Apparently, the Secret Service staff that was supposed to secure the sites prior to President Obama's arrival was more interested in securing themselves a pleasurable night. Their affair with the local sex workers had an unhappy ending, when the agents tried to renegotiate the price at the end of the night.

As soon as the news leaked, the indiscretion of Secret Service in Cartagena took up nearly all the airtime in the US. Even serious news broadcasting channels, such as CNN and the National Public Television and Radio (PBS & NPR) were saturated with the sleazy details of the sex scandal.

Probably more disturbing than the sex scandal coverage was its judgmental tone. Of course, conservative media did not miss this opportunity to paint all of Latin America as the locus of vice. However, even progressive media outlets were accusing the organizers for holding the summit at a city where prostitution was legal. Amongst this moralistic outrage, there was little or no mention of the actual agenda of the Summit, which had brought together the 33 hemispheric heads of state in the first place.

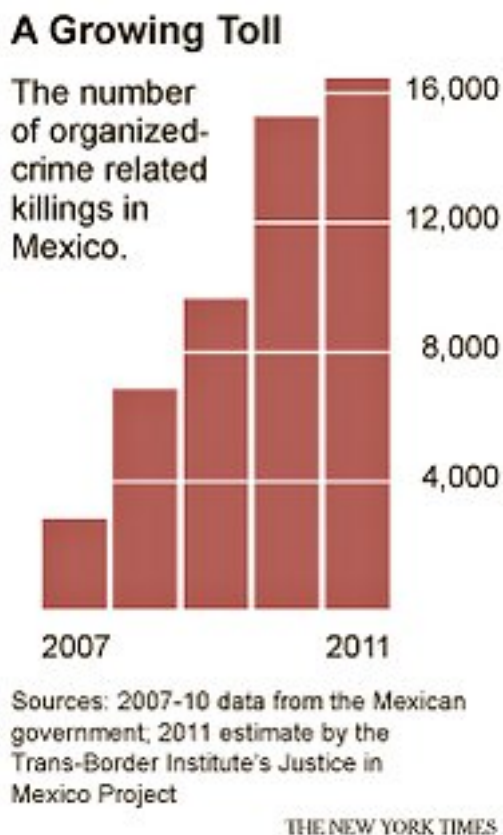
Herein lies an important problem of the American politics today: In order to reach to the lowest common denominator, media has pushed the bar so far down that substantive political issues almost never gets on the public agenda. Populism is gradually diminishing substantive political debate, one sex scandal at a time...

Despite the cacophony over Secret Service agents and prostitutes however, the OAS meeting did cover topics of vital importance. First and foremost among them was the *War On Drugs*.

Drug trafficking and incessant fight against it have been on the agenda of many Latin American countries in the last decades. Lately, the *war on drugs* has been bleeding Mexico dry, with more than 40,000 deaths in the last 4-5 years. This was largely a result of the increasing pressures over the cartels in Columbia. It forced them to reroute through Mexico, making Mexico the hotbed of drug smuggling and turf war between rival cartels.

The US policy makers' approach to the problem is solely from a military and border security perspective. Consequently, they pour millions to secure an extremely porous border (2000 miles, 3200 km) with Mexico, and shower countries that produce the main ingredient of cocaine with generous military aid. This supposedly "tough" approach sidesteps two important aspects of the drug problem:

Figure 1: The Death Toll of Mexican War on Drugs:



First: The US is the largest market for all narcotic substances, ranging from relatively benign marijuana to cocaine and other heavier drugs. As long as there is a lucrative market out there, people will try every possible means to make profit out of it. These methods range from *drug mules* –people who swallow pouches of cocaine and fly them to the US-, to jerry-built submarines that submerge only 10-15 feet below water but still manage to deliver tons of cocaine to the US shores.

Instead of addressing the demand side of the problem, the US drug policies have generated a vicious cycle of heavy penalties at home, and military measures abroad. While the 'tough on drugs' attitude yielded record incarceration rates inside the US, the military combat strategy began to terrorize and destabilize Latin American societies.

Second, the heavy handed and militaristic undertakings had a perverse effect on the drug market itself. Today, drug business is ever more lucrative, albeit more perilous. On this aspect, had the US policy makers looked at the functioning of markets under prohibition, they would have figured out current dynamics much earlier. Better late than never, one hopes...

Figure 2: All Drug Routes Leading to.....



Here is how the market mechanisms work: Let's say we have 10 drug dealers controlling the market. Enforcement is loose, and they are making a total of \$10 million. After severe crackdowns, the number of dealers drop significantly, but because there are no efforts to reduce the demand (i.e. education, rehabilitation, etc.), the same \$10 million market is now divided between just 2-3 dealers. Inevitably, under these circumstances the slices of the pie have gotten much bigger, stakes are much higher, and therefore competition is more fierce and deadly.

Studies on escalating drug violence in Mexico show time and again that the overwhelming majority of the victims are cartel members themselves. The two largest cartels (Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel) are responsible for the great majority of the bone chilling violence, which includes decapitated and dismembered bodies spread across Mexico. When one adds the steady flow heavy weaponry (M-16s and AK 47s) from the US down south, the outcome is a bloodbath in Mexico. Even though more than 85 % of the weapons seized in Mexico are traced back to the US, there are virtually no attempts to impose stricter regulations to gun purchases in the US.

Many analysts try to explain the recent drug related carnage in Mexico in cultural or historical terms. However, a recent study on the emergence of Mafia in Italy sheds more light to the debate by highlighting the particular market realities. In an effort to explain why Sicily was so strongly associated with mafia compared to the rest of Italy, economists underline two distinct developments: The sudden increase in global demand for citrus (as a cure for scurvy) and Sicily's monopoly over lemon trees. Based on data from the late 1800s, their study on Sicilian Mafia shows strong correlation between the emergence of a lucrative market, relatively high barriers to enter that market, and the emergence of mafia in that region.

While the situation in Mexico with drugs is not as benign as the lemons in Sicily, the underlying dynamic that fuels the mafia is considerably similar. As long as the demand for drugs in the US remain strong, the political and military measures would only make its trade more attractive for the Mafioso powers in Mexico.

At the Cartagena Summit, numerous Latin American heads of state who had strong military and security credentials under their belts stated that the current way of dealing with drug trafficking across the continent is increasingly becoming futile. After witnessing a great deal of economic and human resources go down the drain, these leaders are now open to the discussion of alternative methods to tackle the issue. For instance, they are not categorically against decriminalization of certain mild substances.

Unfortunately, current political climate in the US prohibits any rational and reasonable discussion over the issue of drug trafficking. As seen in the case of overinflated coverage about the blunders of the Secret Service in Cartagena, the election year brings out the worst populist reflexes in the US media. Scandals and shallow moralistic strikes take over the airwaves, suffocating substantive political debate. As such, it is nearly impossible to for any of the presidential candidates to propose alternatives to the harsh but futile *war on drugs*.