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Why Hillary Clinton was right about Colombia and Mexico

By recognizing the parallels between the two conflicts, the U.S. and Mexico can learn valuable lessons from Colombia's battle with narco-insurgents.

By Thomas E. McNamara

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Washington and Mexico City are unsure whether Mexico today resembles Colombia's insurgency of 20 years ago. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton thinks it does; some Mexicans and, maybe, President Obama think not ("The wrong solution in Mexico," Opinion, Sept. 10). As the American ambassador in Colombia when the notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar was at riding high, and later when he was defeated, I side with Clinton in seeing many parallels.

The parallels begin with the Colombia of the Escobar days being a large, progressive democracy with a vibrant economy. Colombia had a determined president and political leaders who understood the terrible consequences of failing to take control of their own country. This parallels Mexico today.

Colombia suppressed the cartel insurgencies with armed force and a political program. This approach was, and is, largely supported by the Colombian people (witness the election victory of President Juan Manuel Santos, who served as defense minister under predecessor Alvaro Uribe). Cartel insurgencies no longer plague Colombia; only a reduced guerrilla insurgency continues. New drug mafias still operate, but Colombian trafficking has been greatly reduced.

In both countries cartels demanded that they, not the government, determine the rules, settle disputes and control police power. This is clearly insurgency: usurpation of sovereign power, control of territory and the use of force to maintain control. What is unusual — and what causes confusion — is that drug lords have a very limited political agenda.

Thus, in matters they don't care about, they don't interfere. The government can run the hospitals and schools, set taxes, pay benefits, have elections, collect the garbage, put out fires and so on. When the cartels' interests are involved, however, they insist that government must be subservient to them on their territory — or deadly violence will result. This is quite different from organized crime by American drug mafias. Our mafias do not attempt to usurp sovereign power.

In one respect, Colombia is different. Besides mafias, there are narco-insurgents with full political agendas — the guerrillas. These are the usual, easily recognized types who proclaim their agenda in revolutionary political statements, military structures and, above all, in their insistence on sovereign control of all territory, not just territory needed for criminal activity.

What is surprising is Mexican denial of the obviously correct comparison with Colombia by Clinton, which is why Obama tried to quiet this contretemps in Los Angeles last week. Rather than object, Mexicans should acknowledge parallels, study the many mistakes and successes of Colombia over the last 20 years and learn from them. Mexicans, Colombians and Americans are partners in the struggle against narco-insurgency, whether of the unusual or the usual kind.

As Colombia learned, so Mexico and Central America will also: Retaking lost sovereign control is violent. Americans must understand that these battles are to regain government control. Reducing trafficking comes later. Mexico's mafias will not disappear, but they can be forced to abandon insurgency.

The U.S. properly supports our neighbors by giving them political, military and law enforcement assistance, as our drug consumption is one cause of the insurgencies — as is drug production south of our border. We cannot just move out of our neighborhood, so we have an interest in cleaning it up. These insurgencies corrupt us, just as they corrupt others.

While we have been a good partner overall, we have failed to control arms smuggling south across the border. Make no mistake: We armed Escobar and the Colombian drug insurgents 20 years ago; we still arm the guerrillas. We also arm the Villarreal Barragan and Beltran Leyva cartels in Mexico. Our pitiful border controls are a national disgrace and a major cause of the blood spilled in Mexico and Colombia.

What we need today is not for Mexico to claim its situation is far different from the Colombians', or Americans thinking this is only a Mexican or a Colombian drug problem. We need all three to recognize that we are partners in a common struggle for legitimate governments to fully control their territories and borders and suppress insurgency by all legitimate means. The three partners are getting there, but none is there yet.

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