

- Battles across borders**
- ① US President Richard Nixon reviews a rise in drug-related arrests 1969-72
 - ② A tailback on a Mexico highway at the US border caused by drug searches, c1970
 - ③ US customs officers search a car on the Mexican border, 1969
 - ④ A Mexican drug enforcement agent attacks an opium-poppy crop, 1999
 - ⑤ Mexican soldiers dropped by helicopter into an opium poppy field, 1977
 - ⑥ Los Angeles police chief Daryl F Gates, 1989. He took a hardline stance on drug use
 - ⑦ Police sniffer dog Lancer searches for drugs at Boston's Logan Airport, 1971

AMERICA'S WAR ON DRUGS: EXPORTING THE FIGHT



As the 1970s dawned, efforts to control the use and trafficking of narcotics increasingly meant that the 'war on drugs' was waged both in the US and overseas. **Benjamin T Smith** explores how the impact of President Nixon's political rhetoric is still felt around the world, nearly 50 years later →

On 17 June 1971, Richard Nixon, the president of the United States, gathered a press conference to present his new strategies for combating drug addiction. Some of his policies were relatively far-sighted: the launch of prevention and rehabilitation campaigns, and the establishment of hundreds of methadone clinics for heroin addicts. But these were ignored by the gathered journalists. Instead, newspapers focused on Nixon's headline claim that drug abuse was "public enemy number one".

An enemy needs confronting, and within days the same newspapers were announcing that the Nixon administration was fighting a "war on drugs". America's – and, by extension, the world's – longest-running unwinnable conflict had begun.

For nearly five decades, US politicians have repeated Nixon's combative refrain. Ronald Reagan claimed that drug abuse was a "repudiation of everything America is". His drug tsar, Carlton Turner, claimed that marijuana increased vulnerability to AIDS. In 1990, Daryl F Gates, Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, suggested casual drug users "ought to be taken out and shot". For the current president, drug-linked crime is the justification – at least, in part – for the building of a vast wall along the US-Mexico border. Law-and-order rhetoric, after all, has always proved a reliable vote-winner.

It's certainly true that, since the counterculture of the 1960s invited young people to 'get high and drop out', narcotics addiction has been a major problem in the United States. Although the dominant drug may have changed – from heroin in the 1970s to crack in the 1980s, methamphetamines in the 1990s and back to heroin in the 2000s – the human cost has only grown. Drug overdoses per 100,000 head of population have increased steadily from 2.8 in 1970 to 3.4 in 1995 and 12.3 in 2010. By 2018, that figure had reached 20 people for every 100,000.

Such political rhetoric has been accompanied by increasingly stringent laws. This ramping-up of legislation began in 1973, when Nelson Rockefeller, governor of New York State, introduced a raft of measures including lengthy mandatory sentences for drug dealers. His approaches soon influenced those of other states, and were locked into federal law with the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which rode the wave of public panic about crack cocaine and introduced the famous 100–1 sentencing disparity. (That directive – removed by Congress as recently as 2010 – mandated the same sentences for those caught with 50g of crack



An addict at a New York City drug rehabilitation centre, c1970. Nixon's policies included some far-sighted ideas such as rehabilitation campaigns

cocaine as for those found in possession of 5,000g of the powdered form.) And they were expanded with the 1994 Crime Bill, with its 'three-strikes' provisions for repeat offenders.

This system has come down hardest on the country's African-American people. Though the majority of illegal-drug users and dealers are white, three-quarters of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latinx. In some places, the difference in incarceration rates is spectacular. In 15 states (mostly in the south), black people have been incarcerated for drug convictions at a rate between 20 and 75 times greater than white people. So unequal are the jail rates that US legal scholar Michelle Alexander has harked back to the era of racial segregation to describe the system, terming it "the new Jim Crow".

Over the years, the causes of these discrepancies have piled up: laws such as the 100-1 sentencing disparity have disproportionately targeted black men, while urban policing strategies have focused on street-corner sellers rather than campus peddlers or Wall Street dealers. Judicial decisions have often made reversing these imbalances virtually impossible.

For some in the Nixon administration, the intention was there from the start of the 'war'. In 1994, John Ehrlichman – Nixon's domestic policy advisor, who was convicted of criminal involvement in the Watergate affair – gave an extraordinary interview to writer Dan Baum, who reported it in 2016 as below:

"You want to know what this was really all about?... The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war [in Vietnam] or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

The war on tour

If the war on drugs has transformed America, its effects have been equally significant abroad. Before President Nixon, the United States' interference in overseas drug policy was sporadic and underpowered. Harry Anslinger, influential former head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN, 1930–62), undoubtedly believed that drugs were a supply-side problem, but he rarely had the manpower or presidential support to do more than hector UN representatives and engineer a few high-profile – but in the end rather futile – overseas busts. Under Nixon, things changed. Brash, moneyed and weighed down with their own internal anxieties, counter-narcotics agents went international. In 1968, the FBN was rebranded as the Bureau of Narcotics and



The need for weed

A man enjoys a joint during July 1970's 'smoke-in' in Washington DC. "Since 1960s counterculture invited young people to 'get high and drop out', narcotics addiction has been a major problem in the US," writes Benjamin T Smith



Imprisoned faithful

Muslim inmates pray in a Texas prison, 1997. Draconian anti-drug laws enacted since the 1960s have led to the imprisonment of a disproportionate number of Africa-Americans

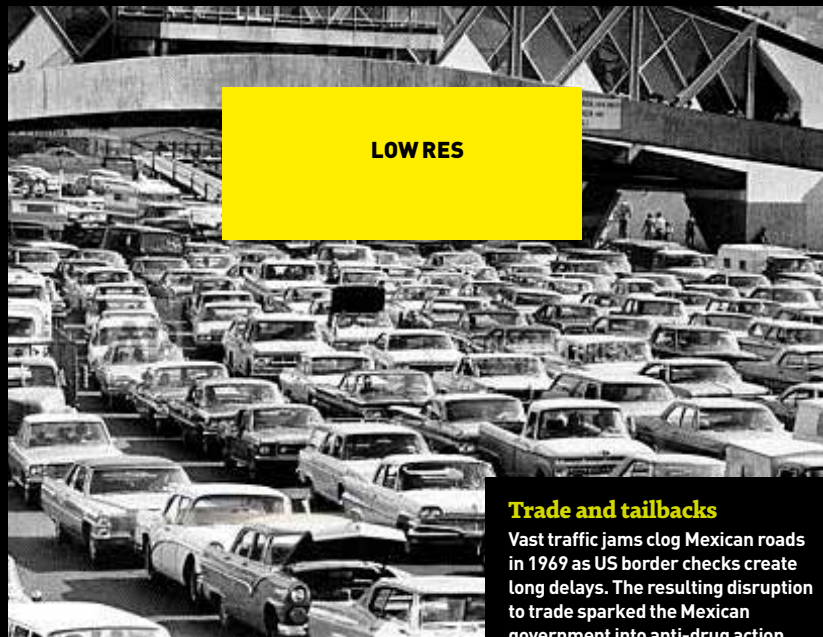
Although the majority of illegal-drug dealers and users in the US are white, three-quarters of the people imprisoned for drug offences have been black or Latinx



Nixon announced a rigorous stop-and-search programme on the US border. Portrayed as a preventative strategy, it caused eight-hour tailbacks into the Mexican desert

Strong arm of the law

Men suspected of narcotics offences are restrained following large-scale raids in 1973. New York governor Nelson Rockefeller introduced tough anti-drug measures that year



LOW RES

Trade and tailbacks

Vast traffic jams clog Mexican roads in 1969 as US border checks create long delays. The resulting disruption to trade sparked the Mexican government into anti-drug action



LOW RES

A wanted man

Mexico-based drug smuggler Alberto Sicilia Falcón, arrested in 1975. He allegedly arranged the supply of weapons to left-wing insurgents in Mexico



A growing problem

Mexican agents hold confiscated marijuana plants after a raid during the anti-narcotics campaign Operation Condor, c1978

LOW RES

Dangerous Drugs (BNDD); in 1973 it underwent another re-boot to become the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). In under five years, staff numbers swelled from a few hundred to a few thousand, dragooned in from the old department as well as from local police forces, US Customs, the Food and Drug Administration and the CIA. The focus also shifted, now split evenly between domestic and international drug threats.

Among the first targets of the newly expanded DEA was America's principal source of marijuana and heroin: Mexico. Initially, US agents found Mexican authorities relatively unconcerned with the drug trade. Hippy culture had little purchase south of the border, where they were derided as *jippis*, often arrested and shorn of their long hair; Mexican addiction rates were negligible; the violence associated with the drug trade was almost non-existent; and, crucially, drugs provided many – politicians, police chiefs, peasant growers – with a healthy income.

Imposing American policy

Three American strategies changed this. In 1969, Nixon announced a rigorous stop-and-search campaign on the US border, dubbed Operation Intercept. It was portrayed as a preventative strategy, designed to halt drug imports into the United States, but it was highly disruptive and caused hours-long traffic jams backing up into the Mexican desert. In doing so, it functioned as a means of extortion, and this disruption of trade pushed the Mexican government into action. As one former FBI agent later explained, “for diplomatic reasons the true purpose of the exercise was never revealed... it was an exercise in international extortion, pure, simple and effective, designed to bend Mexico to our will. We figured Mexico could hold out for a month; in fact, they caved in after two weeks, and we got what we wanted.”

The second strategy involved financial inducements. In the five years following Operation Intercept, the US government donated \$21 million dollars in cash and equipment to Mexico's Federal Judicial Police (PJF), responsible for drug enforcement. Gifts included planes, helicopters, aerial sensory photography equipment, portable radios, automatic weapons, night-vision goggles, mobile radio stations and portable shooting ranges.

The third strategy was to leak reves designed to embarrass the Mexican government. In 1975, the DEA made public details of a two-year investigation into a drug ring run by a Cuban exile-turned-marijuana smuggler, Alberto Sicilia Falcón, who had established his base of operations in an enormous narco-palace in the border town of Tijuana. A flamboyant bisexual, with friends among the Mexican establishment and a girlfriend who had been the lover of the Mexican president, Sicilia Falcón made a good target. Better still, one of the witnesses claimed that Sicilia Falcón was exchanging guns for drugs with guerrilla rebels. The drug trade – so the DEA claimed – was not only a criminal threat, it was funding and arming a left-wing insurgency. Such accusations forced the Mexican authorities to act. They



Burning issue
Peruvian anti-narcotics police, aided by US Drug Enforcement agents, burn a cocaine-processing plant in central Peru, c1980. American anti-drug efforts were exported to countries elsewhere in the world

The campaign in Mexico was a sign of things to come. Over the following years, similar programmes were wheeled out in Jamaica, Peru, Chile and, most recently, Afghanistan



LOW RES

Crop rotation
A helicopter sprays a Mexican narcotics crop with herbicides in the late 1970s or early 1980s during the anti-narcotics campaign dubbed Operation Condor

not only arrested Sicilia Falcón, but also gave in to US demands for a more confrontational counter-narcotics campaign.

Together, the three strategies worked. They blended with the aims of Mexican government, which wanted to extend direct political control into its more remote regions. And they found supporters among certain Mexican officials who sought to use the war on drugs to promote their own careers – for instance, Luis Echeverría aimed to become head of the UN on the back of his counter-narcotics policies. Cooperation culminated with Operation Condor, a vast multi-agency operation that from 1976 onwards targeted opium- and marijuana-growing regions with aerial herbicide spraying, mass arrests and military incursions into particularly troublesome zones.

In terms of numbers, the results were impressive. Drug arrests, narcotics seizures and the acres of drug plants destroyed increased year on year throughout the 1970s. Prisons filled and so-called kingpins were arrested or, if necessary, shot.

Cost of the conflict

The costs, though, were immense. Some were the direct results of the aggressive policing. Funded by the US government, trained and legitimised by the DEA, the PJF expanded both in size and power. In many towns and cities it acted like an invading army, killing suspected drug traffickers, arresting others and subjecting them to savage forms of torture. One DEA agent used to joke that a particularly unpleasant commander had “killed more Mexicans than smallpox”.

A team of lawyers who interviewed 400 detainees of Operation Condor found that most were poor peasants busted for growing a handful of marijuana plants, and had been subjected to multiple forms of torture, including beating, waterboarding, suffocation and rape. (The police had even invented their own distinct slang for such actions: Mexican waterboarding was known as ‘the *tehuacanazo*’, after the brand of spring water that was fired up a suspect’s nose.) These were the lucky ones: others were just booted out of helicopters into the Pacific Ocean.

Other effects were more indirect. Until the 1970s, the Mexican drug trade had been marked by teamwork rather than competition. The market was big enough to share, so conflicts and murders were rare. Official pressure changed this. Faced with the prospect of torture or death, notions of cooperation and trust disappeared, with many traffickers turning on their former allies and very consciously using the police to take out their rivals. What had been a business turned into a war.

The US campaign in Mexico was a sign of things to come. Over the following years, similar programmes were wheeled out in dozens of countries including Jamaica, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Thailand and, most recently, Afghanistan. As in Mexico, these actions often tied in with domestic state-building efforts, and regularly sucked in both the local military and a newly tooled-up police. They were almost always dogged

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Benjamin T Smith is reader of Latin American history at the University of Warwick



Farmers harvest sap from opium poppies in Afghanistan which, despite long-running US operations, remains the world’s top opium producer

by accusations of brutality and torture. Most damningly, they failed to achieve any real reduction in narcotics supplies. At best, they pushed cultivation to other, relatively peaceful areas. At worst, they turned trafficking groups against one another and sparked bloody, murderous conflicts.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the country where it all began – Mexico. Since 2006, the Mexican government has waged its own militarised war on drugs. It has done so with the open support of the US, which has offered money (\$1.5 billion at last count), guns, telecommunications networks, on-the-ground assistance and, above all, legitimacy.

The results have been unerringly predictable. Just as in the 1970s, official pressure has caused cartels to fragment, fan out, turn on one another, and become involved with other, much more violent forms of crime. International pressure to investigate government massacres has been negligible.

Things proceed much as they always have in the US. Some American governments have been more repressive than others. The Clinton and both Bush administrations embraced harsh anti-drug rhetoric and stringent laws, for instance, whereas the 1970s administration of Jimmy Carter flirted with decriminalising marijuana; more recently, Barack Obama spoke out against mass incarceration. Yet those latter two faced opposition in the legislature and the judiciary, and their actions were predominantly symbolic; actual reductions in the prison population were slight.

Meanwhile, the drug trade continues as before. In 2018, America suffered its highest-ever number of drug overdoses. More people died from opioids than gun crime or car crashes. To date, there have been no winners in the war on drugs. 🌐