

Book Review

William L. Marcy. *Narcostates: Civil War, Crime, and the War on Drugs in Mexico and Central America*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023. Bibliography, appendix, index, maps, figures, 359 pp.; Hardcover \$115.00, e-book: \$115.00.

As drug trafficking proliferates across the globe, and as consumption patterns and trafficking routes change, Central America has become a key player in the illicit industry. Its geographical location serves as a strategic corridor for cocaine and other drugs moving from South America to Mexico, destined mainly for the United States. Other characteristics such as its extensive coastline, ports, porous borders, weak institutions, high levels of corruption, a history of political instability, and the presence of powerful criminal organizations, has also facilitated the movement of drugs throughout the region.

One of the major successes of the US-led War on Drugs declared by President Nixon in 1971, was the demise of the powerful Colombia Medellín and Cali cartels. As an unintended consequence came the solidification and strengthening of Mexican drug cartels, coupled with the destabilizing effects of civil wars in Central America, created the perfect conditions for drug trafficking to proliferate becoming an uncontrollable narcocorridor. The failed strategies and incapacity of governments to combat drug trafficking and drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have given these groups more room to maneuver to operate not only in Mexico but to establish a strong presence in Central American countries fortifying the links with other criminal organizations. The empowerment of Mexico's cartels is crucial to the understanding of the propagation of drug trafficking in Central America where they have found a safe haven to further their operations.

Vast is the literature on the US-led War on Drugs and its impacts in Latin America, especially in countries such as Colombia and Mexico. Not much has been written, however, on the historical and relevant role of Central America. This is a major contribution of William L. Marcy's book *Narcostates: Civil War, Crime, and the War on Drugs in Mexico and Central America* (2023). *This work presents* the roots of drug trafficking drawing parallels with Mexico and the civil wars in Central America from 1972 to 2020. The author asks: How did the Central American region devolve into the lawless narcotrafficking corridor and distribution hub that exists today? What effect did Central America's civil wars have on the proliferation of narcotrafficking

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through the Central American isthmus and Mexico? Why did the war on drugs in Mexico spill over into Central America after its civil wars ended? What were the methods and major events that Mexican narcotraffickers and their Central American affiliates used to challenge the legitimacy of state power institutionalized in both Mexico and Central America? Why did Central American police and military reorganizations in the post-civil war period and the implementation of the Mérida Initiative and CARSÍ fail to rein in the cartels? And finally, did US policy “Colombianize” the drug wars in Mexico and Central America? In addressing these questions, the author traces the development and strengthening of drug corridors, drug trafficking operations, and criminal organizations, along with its sociopolitical and economic consequences in Central America.

Marcy’s study is well-informed. It provides rigorous research and presents insights into newly released reports. Most of the material for this study was made available through a declassification process with the US State Department and Department of Justice. Utilizing multiple primary sources, including US Embassy reports to the State Department and other federal agencies, in addition to congressional reports, newspapers, personal interviews, and archival research in the National Archives and the National Security Archives at George Washington University, the author masterfully pieces together and presents a comprehensive examination of the history and evolution of the war on drugs in the region and its inadvertent consequences. Through tracing analysis, Marcy identifies the critical junctures that led to the cases studied in this book (i.e., Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Sandinista-Cuban ties with drug trafficking) each shaping its role in the drug trafficking industry, brewing different types and of criminal organizations (i.e., gangs, guerrillas, DTOs), and the nature of criminal activities that have grown in the region as a whole.

The author navigates the complexities of the war on drugs, examining the issues through various levels of analysis. In other words, Marcy looks at the domestic policies, the regional impacts, and the international dynamics that shape drug trafficking routes and enforcement efforts. Along the chapters, the author points to the current realities of drug trafficking, arguing that throughout the region, the power of the drug cartels sometimes equates to that of the state itself, creating “Narcostates” where criminal organizations exert significant influence and control over territories uncovering the crude reality of the intricate networks of drug trafficking today. The book also offers a comprehensive and robust analysis of the negative impacts the illicit industry has exerted in these countries, including those in politics, the economy, governance, institutional capacity, violence, security, and development.


Marcy’s work makes one wonder about the dialectical dynamics that unintentionally reinforced the drug trafficking industry. It posits the question if Central American countries contributed to the strengthening of drug trafficking and criminal organizations or if the war on drugs led to the formation of criminal organizations, especially gangs, and produced high levels of violence. In this context, Marcy’s narrative also bridges two bodies of literature together, gangs and DTOs. A recent wave of literature has been dedicated to policies such as *mano dura* or “iron

fist” that was implemented by Bolsonaro in Brazil to combat gangs, violence, and drug trafficking, and more recently by Bukele in El Salvador. Putting these works together can point to a different perspective of the phenomenon.

The book closes with the question: Is it possible to close the narcocorridor? The author concludes “[A]s long as narcotics remain illegal and in high demand, the answer is no” (p. 306). Marcy invites us to rethink drug policy into other options in the drug policy spectrum such as legalization, depenalization, or decriminalization, and move away from criminalization to focus more on harm reduction policies as many countries in Europe and more recently in Latin America have. The author also offers a perspective on drug policy particularly in “narcostates,” including institutional strengthening, and international cooperation, addressing the root causes of the proliferation of drug trafficking in the region.

This study is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the complex dynamics of the war on drugs and other factors that have influenced the state of drug trafficking in the region today. Marcy’s work is important and relevant. It urges the need to formulate and implement more effective policies and to better understand the war on drugs from another perspective, to identify the ever-changing nature of criminal organizations, the opening and shifting of new routes, and the convergence and strengthening of criminal organizations with networks that run throughout the entire region.

Studying the war on drugs at present remains critically essential to address the far-reaching impacts on the sociopolitical and economic environments that affect vulnerable regions plagued with extreme violence and corruption. Studying the historical and current contexts of these regions as a whole can draw different lessons to develop evidence-based alternatives. As the author suggests, other approaches should be implemented to continue combating drug-related challenges in “narcostates.” Marcy’s book is an important and timely read for academics, experts, policymakers, or anyone interested in drug wars and policy.

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