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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Mexican Evolution

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AMERICA'S distorted views can have costly consequences, especially for us in Latin America. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Mexico this week is a good time to examine the misconception that Mexico is, or is on the point of becoming, a "failed state."

This notion appears to be increasingly widespread. The Joint Forces Command recently issued a study saying that Mexico — along with Pakistan — could be in danger of a rapid and sudden collapse. President Obama is considering sending National Guard troops to the Mexican border to stop the flow of drugs and violence into the United States. The opinion that Mexico is breaking down seems to be shared by much of the American news media, not to mention the Americans I meet by chance and who, at the first opportunity, ask me whether Mexico will "fall apart."

It most assuredly will not. First, let's take a quick inventory of the problems that we don't have. Mexico is a tolerant and secular state, without the religious tensions of Pakistan or Iraq. It is an inclusive society, without the racial hatreds of the Balkans. It has no serious prospects of regional secession or disputed territories, unlike the Middle East. Guerrilla movements have never been a real threat to the state, in stark contrast to Colombia.

Most important, Mexico is a young democracy that eliminated an essentially one-party political system, controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, that lasted more than 70 years. And with all its defects, the domination of the party, known as the P.R.I., never even approached the same level of

virtually absolute dictatorship as that of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, or even of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Mexico has demonstrated an institutional continuity unique in Latin America. To be sure, it can be argued that the P.R.I. created a collective monarchy with the electoral forms of a republic. But since 2000, when the opposition National Action Party won the presidency, power has been decentralized. There is much greater independence in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. An autonomous Federal Electoral Institute oversees elections and a transparency law has been passed to combat corruption. We have freedom of expression, and electoral struggles between parties of the right, center and left.

Our national institutions function. The army is (and long has been) subject to the civilian control of the president; the church continues to be a cohesive force; a powerful business class shows no desire to move to Miami. We have strong labor unions, good universities, important public enterprises and social programs that provide reasonable results.

Thanks to all this, Mexico has demonstrated an impressive capacity to overcome crises, of which we've had our fair share. They include the government's repression of the student movement of 1968; a currency devaluation in 1976; an economic crisis in 1982; the threefold disaster of 1994 with the Zapatista rebel uprising, the murder of the P.R.I. candidate for president and a devastating collapse of the peso; and the serious post-election conflicts of 2006.

We have overcome these challenges and drawn meaningful lessons from them. We learned to diversify the economy and reduce the state's financial monopolies, paving the way for the eventual Nafta agreements. Election controversies and the threat of political violence have led to a national acceptance of a peaceful and orderly transition to democracy.

Now once again, we face enormous problems. The worldwide financial crisis is intensifying our ancient dramas of poverty and inequality. But the most acute problems are the increased power and viciousness of organized crime

— drug trafficking, kidnappings and extortion — and an upsurge in ordinary street crime.

This may be the most serious crisis we have faced since the 1910 Mexican Revolution and its immediate aftermath. More than 7,000 people, most of them connected to the drug trade or law enforcement, have died since January 2008. The war against criminality (and especially the drug cartels) is no conventional war. It weighs upon the whole country. It is a war without ideology, rules or a shred of nobility.

Is it a war that Mexico can win? Not through the tactics of any conventional war. But there can be progress by restricting the range of the enemy. Since taking power in 2006, President Felipe Calderón has sent more than 40,000 army troops to various Mexican states to combat drug gangs, and has had some victories in drug-related seizures and arrests. Even though Mr. Calderón enjoys a relatively high approval rating, the government has not managed to reassure the general population. Large sectors of Mexican society seem to endure these events as if they were part of a nightmare from which some morning we will awake. But it will not just disappear, and Mexicans must help fight the war by mobilizing public opinion, supplying information to the authorities and vigilantly supervising both elected and appointed officials. This kind of civic participation has already begun to yield some successes in Mexico City.

THE government, for its part, must continue the huge task of cleaning up the dark corners of its police forces, establishing an efficient intelligence network in order to keep ahead of the cartels. Mexico also needs a secure prison system that will not serve as a sanctuary where sentenced drug bosses can continue conducting their business and recruiting new criminals. It is also vital to speed up the purification of a judicial system that is slow and inefficient in its handling of serious crimes. We could use more political cooperation as well: Mr. Calderón (and his National Action Party) are now fighting this battle without significant support from the opposition parties, the P.R.I. and the Party of the Democratic Revolution.

The Mexican print media has not been entirely helpful either. Of course, freedom of press is essential for democracy. But our print media has gone beyond the necessary and legitimate communication of information by continually publishing photographs of the most atrocious aspects of the drug war, a practice that some feel verges on a pornography of violence. Press photos of horrors like decapitated heads provide free publicity for the drug cartels. This also helps advance their cause by making ordinary Mexicans feel that they are indeed part of a "failed state."

While we bear responsibility for our problems, the caricature of Mexico being propagated in the United States only increases the despair on both sides of the Rio Grande. It is also profoundly hypocritical. America is the world's largest market for illegal narcotics. The United States is the source for the majority of the guns used in Mexico's drug cartel war, according to law enforcement officials on both sides of the border.

Washington should support Mexico's war against the drug lords — first and foremost by recognizing its complexity. The Obama administration should recognize the considerable American responsibility for Mexico's problems. Then, in keeping with equality and symmetry, the United States must reduce its drug consumption and its weapons trade to Mexico. It will be no easy task, but the United States has at least one advantage: No one thinks of it as a failed state.

Nor, for that matter, did anyone ever see Al Capone and the criminal gangs of Chicago as representative of the entire country. For Mexico as well, let's leave caricatures where they belong, in the hands of cartoonists.

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