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Here's Why the Cartels Are So Deeply Entrenched in Mexican Society

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Politics is the downstream of culture — that applies in a very significant way not only to policymaking decisions here at home, but in our foreign policy.

One of the most pervasive issues in current American politics is the ongoing drug crisis. Fentanyl and other hard drugs continue to ruin and take the lives of breathtaking numbers of American citizens, including the nation's youth.

Per numbers obtained by Fox News, of the 108,000 overdose deaths that occurred in the United States in 2021, over 80,000 involved opioids like fentanyl. The danger behind these substances is that they are often mixed into other drugs so that users don't even know what they're actually taking.

As elected officials grapple with this crisis, attention has turned to Mexico's drug cartels. Most fentanyl is made in Mexico with ingredients shipped in from China. The finished product is usually smuggled across the southern border and typically discovered when intercepted at ports of entry by Customs and Border Patrol's (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO).

One of the proposed solutions to the drug issue that is gaining traction among certain circles, including among some members of the Republican Party, is to invade Mexico to directly wage war against the cartels.

"We are going to unleash the fury and might of the United States against these cartels," are the recent words of Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), the ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "We're going to destroy their business model and their lifestyle because our national security and the security of the United States as a whole depends on us taking decisive action."

Reps. Dan Crenshaw (R-Texas) and Mike Waltz (R-Fla.) this week put out a proposal for authorizing the use of military force against Mexico's drug cartels.

"The cartels are at war with us — poisoning more than 80,000 Americans with fentanyl every year, creating a crisis at our border, and turning Mexico into a failed narco-state," Crenshaw wrote in his press release. "It's time we directly target them. My legislation will put us at war with the cartels by authorizing the use of military force against the cartels. We cannot allow heavily armed and deadly cartels to destabilize Mexico and import people and drugs into the United States. We must start treating them like ISIS — because that is who they are."

As this author has previously written, invading Mexico would be a terrible idea that would only serve to

saddle the American people with trillions of dollars in debt and result in significant loss of life among our troops while doing zero to stop the drug trade in the long term.

Essentially, an invasion of Mexico would be a repeat of Afghanistan, another failed war contributing to the loss of America's stature.

Proposals such as the call to invade Mexico place inordinate focus on the cartels, perhaps because they make for an easy target. Dealing with the real underlying issues such as mental health and addiction and questions of legality of narcotics is difficult. It's so much easier to send some troops across the border and blow stuff up.

Plus, it simplifies complex moral and philosophical debates into a black-and-white picture of good versus evil. The cartels are obviously bad; given their lawlessness and the brutal terror they inflict on innocent people, it's all too convenient to single them out as the sole cause of the fentanyl crisis. "It's all the cartels' fault! They're the ones killing our children! Annihilate them and the problem will go away!"

In reality, the question of what really causes the drug crisis and what to do about it is one that merits its own in-depth analysis.

But on the matter of the cartels, it's important for anyone involved in policymaking to understand why there's no getting rid of them — and, thus, why any effort to do so strictly by military means would be futile.

While the drug trade fuels the cartels, the reality is that they would continue to exist and thrive even if drugs were no longer a profitable business.

Part of it is that new criminals will always rise up so long as there is illicit money to be made. And, contrary to the arguments made by those who see legalization of all drugs as the ultimate panacea, it isn't just about the drugs. These criminal organizations will always find some new illegal activity to latch onto.

This can be seen with the Gulf cartel, Mexico's oldest crime syndicate. They started with alcohol during Prohibition, then went on to heroin, then cocaine and meth in the 80s, and now are focused on kidnapping and extortion.

But there's something more primordial: The reason the cartels in Mexico are inevitable and here to stay is that they are a manifestation of certain deeply ingrained aspects of Mexican culture.

One of those aspects is that Mexican society, contrasted with that of the United States and other Western nations, is much more low-trust, rather than high-trust. That means people do not trust others in their society who are not in their inner circle, nor do they place as much emphasis on the notion of the public good.

Going hand-in-hand with this is a propensity to tribalism. People do not care so much about society as a whole, but are interested in what benefits their family or tribe (which is an extension of the family).

These characteristics have two results: One is the fostering of crime and corruption, as many do not care so much about the laws of the state — getting ahead for oneself and one's family is more important, even if it means breaking the law.

The other result is the formation of various power centers independent of the official government, ones centered around families and tribes rather than the law.

In a sense, Mexican culture still has traits of feudalism in it, of a social order built around powerful

warlords who are supported by their subjects. This is further compounded by Latin culture's propensity to produce and favor the leadership of strongman figures who govern by the might of their personality and charisma.

Historically, this can partially be explained by Mexico's history, prior to populist reforms, as a hierarchical one based around the feudalistic hacienda-agrarian model brought over by the Spanish. What we see today is that same model playing out, with the heads of the cartels taking the place of the *hacendados*, or landlords. Narcos even call their bosses by the same term, *patrón*, which the *peones*, or workers, would call the landlords on the hacienda.

It is a similar phenomenon to the Sicilan Mafia. Sicily historically was repeatedly conquered by and passed around by one state after another. The people of the island, rather than forming allegiance to their ever-changing list of foreign occupiers, developed a culture based around local warlords who exacted "payment" from the peasantry in exchange for "protection." It was out of this culture that the criminal society we know as Cosa Nostra was born.

Can this culture in Mexico change? Certainly. Many nations have gradually evolved out of such cultures over the course of centuries throughout history. But it is not something that happens overnight, and it is far outside the scope of American policymakers to try to address.

The best plan for Americans is to focus on the things happening inside our borders — and *at our border* — that we can actually control.