



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on March 10, 2012

Latin America Debates Drug Legalization; Obama Demands More War on Drugs

Last month, Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina — a widely respected former military general with a long history of [battling communism](#) and tyranny — put the issue in the spotlight when he [declared](#) that the drug war needed to be reconsidered. The tough-on-crime leader suggested, among other measures, the legalization of the use and transportation of narcotics.

And he plans to seek support from other governments in the region ahead of an upcoming summit. “We’re bringing the issue up for debate,” he stated on February 13. “Today’s meeting [with El Salvador President Mauricio Funes] is intended to strengthen our methods of fighting organized crime. But if drug consumption isn’t reduced,” he warned, “the problem will continue.”

Guatemala has become one of the most dangerous nations in the world, with a soaring murder rate, overcrowded prisons, and vast swaths of territory largely controlled by criminals. Meanwhile, powerful international drug cartels continue to terrorize the populace, with well over half of all cocaine shipped to the United States transiting through Central America.

Despite more and more billions spent on the “war,” however, the problems keep getting worse. And Latin Americans are finally getting sick of it.

“Are we going to be responsible to put up a war against the cartels if we don’t produce the drugs or consume the drugs? We’re just a corridor of illegality,” [noted](#) former Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein, who led Perez Molina’s transition team. “The issue of drugs in the U.S. is very marginalized, while for Guatemala and the rest of Central America it’s very central.”

In the United States, drug-warrior bureaucrats [blasted](#) the Guatemalan proposal to legalize drugs. But it received strong support among diverse groups — including from a prominent organization of law-enforcement officers and judges opposed to the drug war.

“President Molina’s initiative is unprecedented and marks the first time since the launching of the ‘war on drugs’ by Richard Nixon in 1971 that a foreign head of state has actively challenged the US-led policies of drug prohibition and tried to build a coalition against drug prohibition,” noted Major Neill Franklin (Ret.), Executive Director of [Law Enforcement Against Prohibition](#) (LEAP).

“We all need to show our support to President Molina and his potential Latin American allies,” Franklin said in a statement, asking supporters to sign a petition in favor of the plan. “We also need to put pressure on the Obama administration to ensure that it doesn’t stall Molina’s proposal, and that it





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allows a truthful debate at the April 14-15 Summit of the Americas and beyond.”

In LEAP’s [petition](#) supporting the effort, the organization noted that despite enormous resources “wasted” on the drug war, it is a failure that has unleashed “destruction and chaos all over the world” — particularly in Central America. “Prohibition is the worst possible form of control as it leaves control in the hands of powerful criminal organizations,” the statement noted.

And it is not just the Guatemalan government and U.S.-based activists re-thinking the costly war. All across Latin America and beyond, the debate is raging and opposition to prohibition is growing.

In Mexico, as the [U.S.-funded “War on Drugs”](#) accelerated and got the military involved, the nation spiraled into chaos, with murder rates soaring to unheard of levels. In response to the spectacular failure of the crackdown, the nation legalized marijuana. And despite being among the largest recipients of U.S. drug war-related tax dollars, Mexican President Felipe Calderon even [suggested](#) that “market alternatives” be considered in the United States to deal with drugs.

Colombia has been ravaged by the drug war over a period spanning several decades — much of the world’s cocaine is produced there, and profits are used to finance guerrilla war. But the nation is also increasingly leaning toward the idea of legalization. President Juan Manuel Santos even said he would support legalization if other governments would agree.

“It’s a theme that must be addressed,” Colombia’s Foreign Minister Maria Holguin told reporters last month. “The war on drugs definitely hasn’t been the success it should be and it’s something the countries should discuss.”

Other heads of state in the region, including Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla and President Mauricio Funes of El Salvador, have [backed](#) the calls for discussions about legalizing drugs, too. And countless former leaders from around the world — and particularly Latin America, with more than a few prominent ex-Presidents — have joined the growing chorus in support of ending the drug war.

As the debate in Latin America grew louder, however, the Obama administration promptly [dispatched](#) high-level functionaries to tone down the enthusiasm and quash any potential rebellion before it got out of hand. Vice President Joe Biden arrived in the region on March 4 to reiterate the U.S. government’s opposition, saying the benefits of legalizing drugs would be outweighed by new problems like the need for bureaucracy to regulate them and an increase in users.

“I think it warrants a discussion. It is totally legitimate,” Biden was quoted as saying. “And the reason it warrants a discussion is, on examination you realize there are more problems with legalization than with non-legalization.” He did not mention the experiences of other nations that have legalized drugs such as Portugal, which saw a dramatic decline in drug use, addiction, and crime — in fact, ten years after legalization, drug [abuse dropped by half](#).

Before Obama upped the ante and sent Biden, U.S. “Homeland Security” boss Janet Napolitano went to Guatemala to deliver essentially the same message. “The United States does not view decriminalization as a viable way to deal with the narcotics problem,” Napolitano, known among critics as “Big Sis,” reportedly [told](#) the Guatemalan President. She also promised more “assistance” and “more and more cooperation” for governments that fight drugs with sufficient vigor.

Critics of the Obama administration’s strategy lambasted the recent comments supporting the perpetuation of the U.S. government’s tax-funded bullying and perpetual war on various substances. But pressure is building at all levels across the region to end current policies.



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“Latin American citizens and government leaders are openly protesting a model where their nations pay in blood and lives to fill U.S. defense contractors’ pockets and spread the Pentagon’s global reach — with few, if any, positive results,” [wrote](#) Laura Carlsen, the director of the Mexico City-based Americas Program for the Center for International Policy. “A real discussion on effective strategies has to include the option of legalization.”

Despite the massive flow of U.S. tax dollars to Latin American governments, American influence in the region is on the decline as the federal government becomes increasingly belligerent and indebted while [socialists continue to take over](#). And according to analysts, the Obama administration’s protests, arm-twisting and demands may soon begin to fall on deaf ears.

“The intransigence displayed by the Obama administration and Janet Napolitano might end up backfiring,” [noted](#) Jeffrey Dhywood, author of the recently released book *World War D: The Case against prohibitionism, roadmap to controlled re-legalization*. “The time is gone when the US could dictate its fiat to the region. Its strategy of string-attached aid, which often amounts to intimidation and bribery, eerily mirrors the ‘plomo o plata’ strategy of the drug cartels.” The cartel strategy translates to “lead/bullets or silver/money,” which essentially means take the bribe or pay dearly.

Of course, constitutional scholars have pointed out that the [U.S. Constitution does not](#) even give the federal government any authority to wage a war on drugs inside America, let alone around the world. But the federal government has nonetheless already spent [over \\$1 trillion](#) on its drug efforts in Latin America alone, even as the [U.S. border remains wide open](#). Meanwhile, some 50,000 people in Mexico alone have paid for the war with their lives in recent years.

But inside the United States, the war on drugs is coming under increasing pressure, too. Over a dozen states have already [nullified](#) federal marijuana laws by legalizing the plant for medical use. And citizens in several states including [Colorado](#) and California are potentially on the verge of completely legalizing cannabis even for recreational purposes.

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