

# Book Review

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Marcy, W.L. (2023).

*Narcostates: Civil war, crime, and the war on drugs in Mexico and Central America*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 359 pp. Hardcover: \$115.00 ISBN: 978-1-68585-327-3 Paperback: \$38.50 ISBN: 978-1-962551-66-3 Ebook: \$38.50 ISBN: 978-1-962551-67-0

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*Narcostates: Civil War, Crime, and the War on Drugs in Mexico and Central America* unravels the tangled web of violence, corruption, and political instability that has empowered drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) across Mexico and Central America since the 1970s. The author accomplishes this by tracing the evolution of narcotrafficking across the region and drawing on newly declassified documents. Marcy situates the regional dynamics within the broader global economy of drug trafficking, examining the interplay between local narcotraffickers, international consumer markets, and global drug enforcement policies. This contextualization highlights the interconnectedness of regional and global drug control challenges. The book bridges history, criminology, and political science, making it a multidisciplinary examination of an increasingly global issue.

In 12 chapters, the author identifies the causes of the drug trafficking pipeline, the emergence and expansion of Central American drug traffickers, and the eventual replacement of the logistics required to operate such an endeavor by a variety of Mexican DTOs. Marcy argues that the war on drugs in Mexico and Central America has failed and instead led to the rise of narcostates, where drug cartels have taken over state functions and caused widespread violence and instability. Each chapter relates to the central theme while providing stand-alone analyses of specific topics.

The manuscript is bookended with an analysis of the narcotrafficking corridor, from its opening in Mexico and various Central American countries in Chapter 1 to a plan to close it—or the fallacy of such a plan, given U.S. drug policy—in Chapter 12. This framing provides both historical context and policy critique. The counternarcotics efforts of the United States (Chapter 2) precede the engagement of the United States in Central America to safeguard its interests (Chapter 3) and the emergence of Mexican cartel drug trafficking networks (Chapter 4). Mexico's economic and political crises are addressed (Chapter 5), followed by the expansion of Colombian cartel efforts (Chapter 6), the arrival of the War on Drugs in Central America (Chapter 7), and the turmoil caused by intercartel wars in Mexico (Chapter 8). The militarization of the U.S.-Mexican War on Drugs (Chapter 9), the connection between Mexican cartels and Central American youth gangs (Chapter 10), narcotrafficking and immigration (Chapter 11), and an analysis of attempts to close the corridor (Chapter 12) complete the chapter layout.

The chapters collectively serve as both a historical record and a case study of lessons learned. Multiple chapters highlight the actions and inactions of key organizations, including the Central Intelligence Agency, Drug Enforcement Administration, and Federal Bureau of Investigations, as well as the roles of governments in Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the United States. The book examines criminal activities such as arms trafficking, assassinations, cocaine and heroin trafficking, corruption, homicide, marijuana cultivation, and the roles of gangs and guerrilla insurgencies.

The reviewer observed that each chapter resembles a well-crafted prosecution strategy, convicting current, and past governments of failing to curb illicit drug flows. Marcy carefully presents the results of counternarcotics efforts, governmental instability, and the proclamation of the War on Drugs to highlight the systemic failures of segmented, uncoordinated approaches. The book critiques the use of the War on Drugs metaphor as an all-encompassing framework for antidrug efforts. The closing argument evaluates the consequences of militarizing the War on Drugs and underscores the need for solutions in the region. Marcy's call centers on fostering political stability, reforming fiscal policies, and strengthening institutional integrity to reduce cartel influence.

Of particular interest is the appendix, which lists narcotraffickers by name and cartel affiliation. While some may criticize including such details as potentially enhancing their notoriety, the reviewer found this addition to bolster the book's credibility and depth. Unlike many academic works, *Narcostates* avoids the clichéd introduction that highlights the absence of a clear or unified definition of terms. While the term "narcostate" is not explicitly defined, the book provides sufficient references for readers to infer a definition, such as:

A narcostate is a nation where the political and economic systems are heavily influenced or controlled by narcotics trafficking organizations. Drug cartels infiltrate key government institutions, undermining the rule of law and eroding state capacity. These states often experience systemic corruption, heightened violence, and contested governance.

Ironically, the term "narcostate" is absent from the index. It was likely the title was chosen by the publisher, not by the author, which would explain the above discrepancy.

*Narcostates* is a meticulously researched and compellingly argued contribution to the study of international drug trafficking, organized crime, state dysfunction, and international drug policy. With a historical focus on the late twentieth century, the book transcends academia by offering insights for policymakers, law enforcement, and historians seeking to address the root causes of narcotics-related violence or untangle the complex dynamics of narcotrafficking and its impact on state sovereignty and public trust. Marcy successfully balances theoretical rigor with practical analysis, making this a pivotal work in understanding the failures that have deeply eroded governance and stability in Mexico and Central America. By intertwining historical analysis with policy critique, the book serves as both an academic cornerstone and a practical guide for addressing future drug control policies. While the author does not provide a framework for crafting, implementing, and evaluating a workable solution, that step would be best left to policy scientists or economists rather than historians.

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