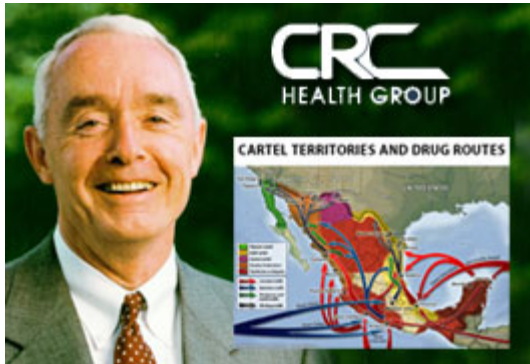


## THE STATUS OF MEXICO'S DRUG CARTELS: A TALK WITH RETIRED GEN. BARRY MCCAFFREY ABOUT ITS IMPACT ON THE US ECONOMY, COURTS AND HEALTHCARE

By Robin Jay



When Retired Four-Star General Barry R. McCaffrey served as Drug Czar under the Clinton Administration, he pushed for a program to help eradicate dangerous Latin drug cartels, the focus of which was in Columbia. Today, it is the Mexican drug cartel that is at the forefront of violence and crime. It has permeated US borders and, according to Gen. McCaffrey, causing much of the drug menace and addiction central to 2 million Americans that crowd correctional facilities, clog courts and place added burden on our healthcare system.

Gen. McCaffrey spoke to *Behavioral Health Central* about why helping Mexico to curb the drug cartel problem needs to be a key component for US economic and national security policy now and into 2017:

***BHC: Gen. McCaffrey, please describe for us your view of the current situation in Mexico regarding the cartels and crime, and how it relates and impacts issues here in the United States.***

General Barry McCaffrey: Well, I sketch out my views in some detail on a December 29th report I sent up to my department at West Pointe, based on my participation as part of an international advisory panel on the crime and drug situation of Mexico. I'm very proud to be associated with the Mexican leadership. This brilliant, courageous President Calderon, the Attorney General Mora, Secretary of Public Security Genaro Luna and others, and I'm about to go back in again and engage their authorities.

They're in a fairly serious state. I mean, there are 105 million people in Mexico, they're in a tremendous economic challenge because of our recession, because of problems with their oil fields, because of the lowered price of oil, ten thousand people murdered, many of them police officers, soldiers, political leaders, news paper reporters. The drug cartel is sort of a non-number, but the magnitude of the problem is there are probably more than a hundred thousand people involved in these drug cartels. So Mexico is fighting to

create a modern, law-based state.

***BHC: And how is that related to our defense system and our patrolling of the borders? How much of it is effecting and getting into this country?***

BM: Well, enormous. There's 305 million of us, we're this giant wealthy society, powerful armed forces, tremendous values. All that's true, but when you look at the problems that effect America, we've got more than two million people behind bars, and when you examine that population, it turns out that a huge percentage of them, I'd say 80 percent of them, are there primarily because they have substance abuse problems. They're addicted to cocaine and alcohol or heroin and alcohol, they're unemployable, they have felony arrest, they're HIV positive. Everybody has walked away from them, except maybe their mother, and a lot of that drug addiction of course comes from the wide spread availability of illegal drugs, particularly among adolescents between the 6th grade and the 12th grade. And then there's a follow onto that. We find that there used to be a collection of mostly American criminal classes doing illegal things; prostitution, drugs, burglary, but increasingly over time, Mexicans dominate the drug trade, the wholesale drug trade in America.

We say there's probably some 200 U.S. cities where Mexican criminal operations are the dominant concern, threat to the local law enforcement. So the other piece of it is, it seems to me priority number one, is we have to work on our own drug abuse problem. That means a drug prevention education message, as well for treatment for the 16 million of us who have a chronic substance abuse problem. But then on top of that, we have to do better at boarder patrol enforcement to try and mitigate the movement of hundreds of metric tons of heroin and cocaine across the boarder, mostly cocaine, and then we say 10 thousand metric tons of high T.H.C. content marijuana, never mind the majority of the methamphetamine scourge coming out of Mexico. And then finally we have to, of course, then confront cartel activity inside the country.

We have a big challenge. We need to start paying attention to it and, probably most importantly, the resources we devote to this problem ought to be commensurate with the magnitude of the threat to the American people -- and that's where we've absolutely been a mess. We devoted last year \$400 million to supporting Mexico's efforts to counter the drug peril to their democracy, \$400 million. Each month in Iraq, at the height of this war, we were spending 12 billion dollars, we were spending 2.4 billion dollars a month in Afghanistan, so again my message to the American people is, "Come on, lets pay attention to this democratic partner and lets provide resources that are appropriate to the scale of the challenge that we are facing."

***BHC: General McCaffery, for the behavioral healthcare professionals that are listening to this, what can they do to help get a message to Washington?***

BM: Well, one thing that really makes me nervous and it comes up about every ten to twenty years as a strong movement pushed by, in some cases, extremely intelligent and apparently sincere but foolish people who make an argument along the lines as follows: It says, 'you know look, the problem is Darwinian, most of us wont use drugs, the ones that do deserve to die off, let's legalize drugs, let's pay no attention, it's not really our problem, it's somebody else's problem -- that will allow us to open the prison gates and then we'll tax drugs just like we do alcohol and cigarettes,' which is some kind of an argument. I mean, for God's sake, cigarettes kill 440,000 people a year, alcohol probably kills a hundred thousand people a year, so we want to legalize drugs, methamphetamine

available at a 7-11 store for our employees, our children, our airline pilots? I'm concerned that our professionals who deal with the consequences of drug abuse, meaning addiction, chronic life long addiction. I mean we can get people into recovery, they can achieve sobriety, they can maintain it a day at a time, but a lot of this is going to be but in peril if we buy this false argument that we can make our problem go away by legalizing drugs, or at least marijuana. You know, come on they say, 'let's grow up, what's a few joints among friends? We all did it.'

Yeah, that may be true, but a lot of people drive drunk also and then slaughter innocents on the highway. Every time I go to a twelve step meeting and being with ten people who are waking up grateful to God that they've achieved sobriety and if I ask them, "What should I tell high school kids about marijuana? No big deal? What's the message?" Invariably, the message we hear from people in treatment is, "Tell them not to get involved in it." It's gateway drug taking behavior, and alcohol and ecstasy can open the door to a life long challenge of addiction. That's one message I pass on to our drug addiction healthcare professionals.

***BHC: So you're saying it seems like the states that are considering passing legalized, taxable substances are those that are wanting to stuff the coffers because of difficult times, and not looking at the long term implication of how it could impact a society?***

BM: Well, I don't even think it's long term, it's short term. I mean anybody that thinks the tax money we get back from cigarettes pays for the immense health consequences of using tobacco products, sadly is unaware of the facts. And anybody that thinks that alcohol taxes achieve some measure of control over alcohol consumption is not thinking very well. There's no question on my mind that if we make the use of currently illegal drugs more socially acceptable in particular to adolescent youth groups, is we say, "Well, you're under 21, under 18, so yeah you can't use methamphetamines, but your buddy can." We're lowering the gateway and allowing these drugs to be far more widely available.

One of the prominent nonsensical statements I always here is, "Yeah, come on, marijuana is immensely more available than beer is to teenagers, and that's transparent nonsense. Both of them are illegal drugs, I might add, you know you're not allowed to consume alcohol under the age of 21 and the day we instituted that rule state by state in response to a federal law, we saw dramatic drops in the rate of alcohol consumption on the highways, among other things. So we know that we don't want our adolescents, and that includes young people below 21 consuming alcohol. We don't want them consuming marijuana either.

So again, I say this is a false promise and it's going to lead us to problems. Whenever I talk to a mayor or a city counsel, I tell them, "Look, go look at your eighth graders, kids in the sixth grade actually know about drugs, thank God for things like the D.A.R.E. program. Grab a sixth grader at random and say, 'Do you know about alcohol? Do you know about cigarettes? Do you know about heroin?'" You get a surprisingly high knowledge coefficient and they'll say, 'I don't want to do that, I don't want to drink alcohol.' They know that's a bad thing for their health and for their social standing.

By the eighth grade, they've started being exposed and consuming illegal drugs and alcohol. Now at one point we had more 8th graders using heroin than 12th graders believe it or not, still pretty rare behavior. So in the 8th grade, they start seeing this kind

of drug show up and you know that's precisely when it seems to most of us that you want a very strong no-use message, and that includes legal prohibitions against consumption of these pharmaceutical products.

***BHC: General McCaffrey is there anything else on the topic of Mexico or on the topic of the war on drugs here in the U.S. that you'd like to mention before we close?***

BM: Well, one thing about Mexico. You know I have immense affection and respect for the culture. The U.S. has got an incredible level of ignorance and sort of public arrogance about Mexico, but the culture is extremely rich. I mean the food, the music the language, the literature, the sense of artistic merit of Mexican culture is phenomenal. If you deal with Mexican business men, you know you've been dealing with some people of their word. They'll deliver the goods, they're good business partners. They've got some anemic public institutions that they're trying to build that the corruption and incompetence of law enforcement is legendary. And we also say that if you go back 25 years, there wasn't much drug addiction in Mexico or Central America, 25 years ago they'd say, "Look, that's a gringo problem. You were the ones stupid enough to stick cocaine up your nose and mainlining heroin, that isn't our problem." And I warned them 10 years ago, I said, "What you're going to see over time is U.S. consumption of illegal drugs is going to go down." It was 1979, the peak year, 13 percent of the population were past month drug users. Now it's probably below 7 percent. We've cut our drug use rates, and you know casual use of cocaine has gone down by 85 percent. But poor Mexico and Central America, who have been handling these drugs on route to the United States. If you handle, if you are a part of the criminal cartel, you start using. It's the same human body, you get addicted for God's sake.

So Mexico has sky rocketing rates of drug abuse, which bodes ill for their society. We know the chronic addicts and it's all poly-drug abuse, it isn't just cocaine, cocaine and alcohol, it's heroin and meth, it's combinations of drugs. We know that drug addictive behavior is devastating and its impact on human health, spirituality, on social relationships, on work ethics. So my message to the Mexicans has always been, "Look, you're hard working people, you have powerful family structures, watch out -- your drug abuse rate is the real thing you have to fear, even more than the violence and the criminality, it's your kids using drugs and that's where they are.

We need to stand with them, not point fingers at them. We need to support them and we have got to recognize our self interest is drug abuse. Alcohol abuse in America is still our number one social evil.

***BHC: General McCaffrey, thank you very much and I look forward to following up with you after your next visit to Mexico.***

BM: I'll be sure and write a report on it and get it to you when I come back from that trip.

***BHC: Fantastic. General McCaffrey thanks again for your time.***

BM: Okay good talking to you, as well.