

Dangerous Addiction

I live in Mexico about an hour south of Guadalajara, on the north shore of Lake Chapala. Permit me a few thoughts on Latin politics, the Mexican economy and,

above all, drugs as seen from south of the border. These could shortly prove important for the United States.

Some things go well here. The Mexican birthrate has fallen sharply. President Calderon is a responsible politician, a great improvement over the dictators who once ruled the country. The far Left, as personified by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador—"AMLO"—seems quiescent. Women are rapidly being integrated into the universities and professions. The country is not static and, if left to itself, would move in wholesome directions.

But it is not being left to itself. Here as elsewhere, jobs go to China. Here as elsewhere, cheap Chinese goods flood the stores. In Guadalajara, the huge market called San Juan de Dios is now referred to as Taiwan de Dios—though of course it is the mainland that provides the goods that crowd out local manufacture. Mexicans complain that NAFTA, by requiring Mexican agriculture to compete with far more efficient American agribusiness, has forced farmers to abandon the countryside and move to cities—not good. Mexico's oil production, which provides a high proportion of the national income, is declining. These problems place, or will soon place, grave strains on the national fabric.

Which brings us to drugs. On top of other problems, drug traffic is tearing the country apart. Policemen and journalists are murdered, gunfights between traffickers occur often in cities. The

enormous profits of selling to the North American market are destabilizing to a country new to democracy. Although it doesn't rhyme in Spanish, people here say that Mexicans are dying because Americans are buying.

Everywhere I have been in Latin America, which is to say most of it, I hear the same thing: the United States is wreaking havoc in other countries by forcing upon them antidrug policies for the benefit of the U.S., expecting them to solve a problem America chooses not to solve itself. America's drug problem, say Latin Americans, is that Americans want drugs. If they don't want drugs, why don't they stop buying them? Why does Bolivia have to enforce American laws that the U.S. won't?

You don't have to agree with their point of view, but it has a degree of plausibility. In the United States, the drug business is solidly established, runs smoothly, and causes little social disruption. Drugs are readily available everywhere, in small towns and cities, in high schools and below. People from all social classes use: the rich buy cocaine, blue-collar whites use amphetamines and crack, and white-collar professionals smoke marijuana. In comparison with other countries, little damage is done. Police and reporters are not killed. Few people get caught using, and the penalties for first-time use are low. The War on Drugs serves only to keep prices high enough to make the traffickers rich but low enough that anyone who wants drugs can afford them.

Mexicans (and Bolivians and Colombians and ...) ask, "Why should we tear our countries apart when the U.S. refuses to control its own traffickers?" I reply lamely, "Well, see, the big traffickers have lawyers and constitutional protections and work through cutouts and so on. Too many of the users are respectable white citizens and it is politically impossible to impose heavy penalties. You can't put high-schoolers in jail for five years or a single mother who works as a beautician and has three children to support. It's easier to try to force other countries not to produce drugs than to police our own country."

The South American response—I mean of the public, not the governments, which want U.S. antidrug money—is: "If your laws don't work, change them. But leave us alone."

It is curious but true that antidrug efforts often work against our political ends. Latin America furiously resents what it sees as American meddling in its affairs. While I don't know how I might quantify it, I know that this resentment helped elect the wave of leftist governments popping up in South America. In Afghanistan, if we destroy the poppy fields that produce most of the world's heroin, the farmers pick up rifles and join the Taliban.

The question becomes: Do the results of the antidrug efforts justify the ill-will and potential destabilization of governments that we don't want destabilized? If the War on Drugs in fact got rid of drugs or made them hard to obtain, the answer might be yes. But drugs are everywhere obtainable. What then do we gain by straining relations abroad? If Mexico goes leftist or falls apart, we may wish we had done something else. ■

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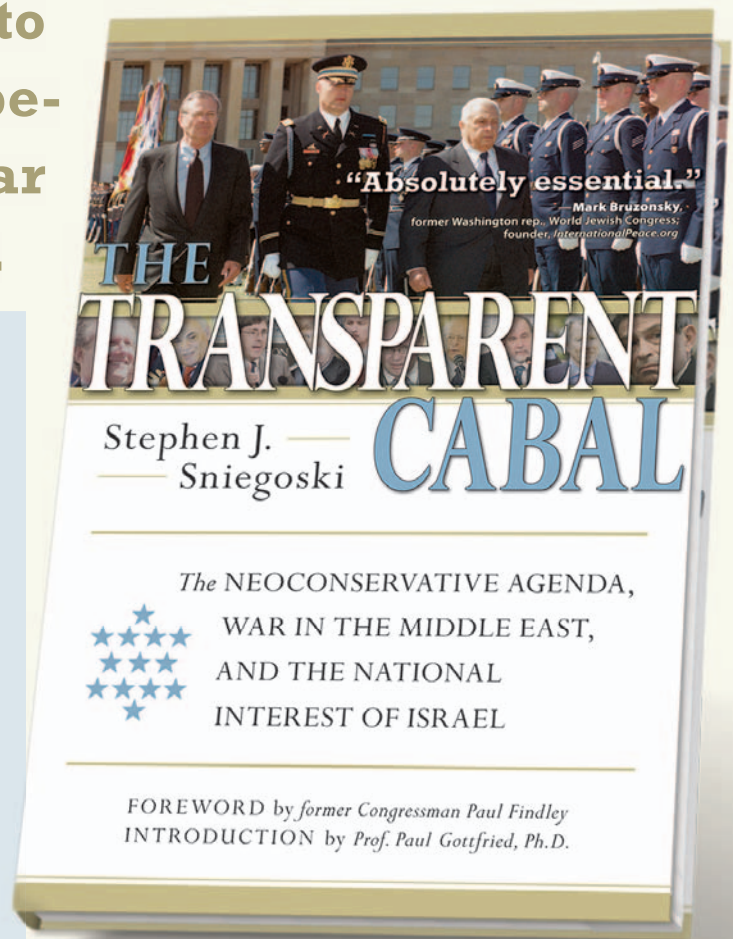
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A fast-paced, impeccably documented book, *Transparent Cabal* provides the key to understanding "neoconservatism," its meaning, and its influence upon U.S. Middle East policy. It is also an essential guide—for concerned Americans and for people everywhere—to appreciating the concerns, aims, and pressure that the next U.S. President will face, as presented by a faction of neoconservatives in key foreign-policy circles.

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Whether this is right or wrong as U.S. policy, Sniegoski admits, is for the American people to answer. But first they have to know what the question is. If American policy is not about the promotion of democracy or the defense of national interests, but rather about something else, it must be discussed and debated among those called upon to give blood and treasure in its pursuit—so that it can then be made the subject of a real, educated vote this coming November.

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