

## Spies, Assassins, and Statesmen in Mexico's Cold War

*Book Review Essay by Wil G. Pansters*

- *Eclipse of the Assassins. The CIA, Imperial Politics, and the Slaying of Mexican Journalist Manuel Buendía*, by Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia Erickson Bartley. University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.
- *Mexico's Cold War. Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, by Renata Keller. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico. How the Countryside Was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism*, by Gladys I. McCormick. The University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

We all know they exist: the connections between formal (elected) government and state authorities (police chiefs, ministers, presidents, statesmen), who move in the public sphere with decorum and pomp and according to prescribed rituals of power, and figures who mainly move in the shadowy world beyond the rule of law to carry out tasks deemed necessary to defend state and economic interests. This is the world where spies, security agents, and professional hitmen meet and mash with criminals and drug traffickers. These connections are often facilitated and organized by formal state agencies such as the secret service, special sections of the police or the army, bridging legality and illegality. Even though everybody remotely interested in the inner workings of U.S. empire and Latin American states will acknowledge them, the books reviewed here reveal, in different degrees, the networks between statesmen, spies and assassins so strikingly that it obliges the reader to rethink previous understandings of particular historical processes or episodes.

While the books have different immediate subject matters, they share an interest in the construction and workings of an, over time, increasingly coercive and violent authoritarian regime in Mexico and its relationships to the international (Cold War) environment. Their primary attention goes out to different time periods (McCormick, 1930s to 1960s; Keller, 1950s to 1970s; the

Bartleys, 1980s), but their narratives often intertwine through certain key players and events. Information previously gathered by or directly obtained from (Mexican and American) secret agents constitutes a key source of all books. There are also important differences: in the specific interpretations of historical processes and their periodization, but above all in their narrative and writing styles. I believe the authors of all three books would subscribe to the, admittedly very, general conclusion that Cold War Mexico was less characterized by a so-called *pax PRIista* than previously assumed; if Mexican authoritarianism provided a form of peace, it was, as Mauricio Tenorio (2014) once said, ‘una paz con muchas cochinadas’, with violence perpetrated and often initiated by state actors. Especially McCormick has strong opinions on the weight of coercion and violence for understanding post-World War II Mexico, but Keller does her bit.

In the scholarship of the Cold War in Latin America, much attention has traditionally been given to South American countries under military rule, and to civil wars and conflicts in Central America, while Mexico was presented as an outlier in this framework. In general terms, the books reviewed here make an important contribution to the scholarship about the Cold War by placing Mexico, with all its specificities, squarely within the overall Cold War framework, and therefore enhancing a broad comparative understanding of Latin America.<sup>1</sup> I will use a temporal criterium to order this review essay. I start with McCormick’s book, which goes back to the 1930s, then Keller’s that really starts its historical analysis in the 1950s, and end with the Bartleys book, which overwhelmingly deals with the last decade of the Cold War.

### **Cradle of revolution, laboratory of authoritarianism**

In a particularly interesting part of McCormick’s *The Logic of Compromise* about the rural roots of authoritarianism in the Zapatista heartland during the mid-twentieth century, she examines a number of reports written by spies of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS), founded in 1947 to carry out the surveillance of organizations and individuals and to develop strategies to co-opt and subvert dissent against the regime. As such, the DFS gradually became a key player in Mexico’s Cold War. The reports from the mid-1950s dug up by McCormick – one written by Juan A. Zorilla, the infamous later director general of the DFS in the 1980s and a key actor in the Bartleys book – provide valuable insights into the backgrounds of the discontent in the sugar cane cooperatives of Morelos and Puebla. They largely confirm popular complaints and talk about the inefficiency, the corruption, and fraud (e.g. by systematically under weighing sugarcane loads), the abuse, and the threat of violence by the cooperative and sugar mill managers and other government institutions. DFS agents acknowledged the poverty and exploitation of the peasants as well as their political and organizational marginalization (pp. 150-152, 158). In fact, when these poor peasants visited the national headquarters of the *Confeder-*

*ación Nacional Campesina* (CNC) to voice their concerns and seek political support, there was a chance they would directly speak to DFS agents infiltrated in the national peasant organization founded by Lárazo Cárdenas in the late 1930s.

But the DFS reports also explain why these peasants might eventually seek extra-legal paths to achieve their goals of a more just society and economy. After all, they stood with their backs against the wall. The activities and networks of Rubén Jaramillo, who had taken up arms previously against the regime, certainly provided the option of considering this. Finally, and for the same reason, the agents actively designed strategies to intervene against and repress (potentially) radicalizing peasants, sometimes in coordination with the army or the judicial police.

This episode brings together key arguments developed in McCormick's book. First, it bridges the period under analysis, the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s: from the years in which Mexico experienced social and political reforms during the Cárdenas presidency (1934-1940) with, most importantly, a vast land reform and collective agro-industrial projects, to the years in which social, political and ideological contradictions led to popular discontent across the country, and to government strategies to reign it in, with state violence if needed. The author's analysis of the changing social and political world of the sugar cane cooperatives provides convincing insight into how revolutionary promises (or dreams) of redistribution, justice and autonomy, either in their original Zapatista or later Cardenista versions, gradually gave way to disenchantment and anger about enduring poverty, exploitation, rampant corruption and violence.

Second, the study claims that 'the secret police used the countryside and, specifically, responses to peasant and worker mobilizations in sugar-production cooperatives ... to test strategies they would later employ to quell dissent in urban sectors' (p. 134). The countryside was thus a laboratory for forms of social control and repression applied on a national scale a decade later. When the government still operated more carefully in the cities, it responded to rural radicalization by tolerating violence used by local and regional authorities, and politically protected business elites, or by exerting repression itself. Fanned by Cold War rhetoric, it cultivated the fear of internal threats. McCormick speaks of the 'establishment of a repressive surveillance apparatus' in the countryside (p. 134). She argues strongly against the view that the DFS was rather weak and unprofessional. This interpretation also leads to her not entirely convincing new periodization of Mexico's authoritarianism: the country's 'dirty war' did not start in the second half of the 1960s with the emergence of guerrilla groups in the north and elsewhere or with the large student conflict in 1968, but 'almost two decades earlier, in those places far away from the public eye of the national and international media' (p. 160).<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, 'political violence was key to understanding the governing regime's longevity....' (p. 210). No wonder that the concept of 'culture of fear' is consistently used in the book.

Third, it is precisely because of this experience that social groups and individuals in strategic zones of the Mexican countryside (for economic or political reasons, or both, as in Morelos) were forced to make choices about how to confront changing circumstances. The heart of McCormick's book is structured around the stories of three Jaramillo brothers (Rubén, Porfirio, and Antonio), who in the author's view represent different paths to deal with marginalization, domination and the incursion of state-formation into their communities. By far the most well-known, Rubén, challenged local and federal elites, worked with the regime, 'allowed himself to be co-opted' occasionally, but also mobilized radicalized peasants and organized several armed uprisings (p. 213). He was brutally assassinated in 1962 together with almost his entire family.<sup>3</sup> His younger brother Porfirio was particularly active in the sugar-producing complex in Atencingo, in nearby southern Puebla. Porfirio engaged in organized demand-making and negotiations within the institutional terrain of the state. As manager of the cooperative, he attempted to radically change labour arrangements, but failed. Considered a threat to powerful regional interests he was murdered in 1955, after which his erstwhile followers signed up to PRI-dominated clientelist arrangements. The comparison between the trajectories of these brothers compels the author to examine the distinct socio-political contexts in which they operated (Morelos and Puebla, respectively). This is an important contribution of the study, as it makes clear that no simple categories can describe and explain processes of domination and resistance, negotiation and repression across Mexico's complex social landscape. Finally, Rubén's oldest brother Antonio represents yet another trajectory, one that gave this book its title. A founding member of the Zácatepec cooperative until his death in 1971, he was briefly involved in protests, but then withdrew from social and political activism. For McCormick he represents the pragmatic choice for accommodating to abusive and corrupt managers, as long as they did provide livelihoods, and certain benefits such as schools, scholarships and health facilities. In other words, Antonio and many like him accepted getting along in the triangle of corruption, clientelism and compromise, and by doing so they supported an increasingly authoritarian regime from below. Undoubtedly this was induced by the anxieties and risks connected to (armed) resistance, and with two of his brothers ultimately assassinated, Antonio understood this very well. McCormick drives home the point: 'The story of Antonio Jaramillo turns out, in the end, to be more representative of peasant experience in southern Morelos than that of his more famous brother, Rubén' (p. 103): he understood 'the logic of compromise in an authoritarian order' (p. 215).

The narrative approach to drape complex social histories around the biographies of three Jaramillo brothers is appealing, and allows the author to deal with issues of family and gender in an almost natural manner. In what is one of the most interesting and original parts of the book, the focus on individual lives shifts towards how these are remembered. And here again, the differences are huge: Rubén is revered, seen as a hero and the subject of myth-making, while

his brothers are practically forgotten. How can this be explained, which actors were and are involved in memory politics and what does it tell us about how citizens want to remember the difficult and formative period of authoritarianism in the Mexican countryside? These are questions examined in the book's last chapter. I particularly appreciate this part since it makes convincingly clear how remembering and hero-making are 'entangled with ongoing political struggles' (p. 184). The emphasis on memory and representation is also McCormick's way to pay tribute to studies that privilege the cultural dimension of state-making and state-society relations.

The author's ability to provide a combined analysis of subnational social histories and biographical trajectories, of hard coercive and soft cultural mechanisms of control, and of localized processes and wider political developments (most significantly, Cold War dynamics), makes *The Logic of Compromise* a most interesting book. Analytically speaking it is also an ambitious book. Within the 'new scholarly synthesis' on the post-revolutionary regime, she occupies a position on its 'hard', more coercive side that stresses the endemic violence of Mexican authoritarianism, but without losing sight of the state's incorporative capacity 'to generate acceptance, hope and resignation'. Others will certainly contest the first point, but much less the second since it shows that state-society relations are not a black-and-white game but permits for myriad engagements, so imaginatively examined through the lives of the Jaramillo brothers.

McCormick does not always write or conceptualize in the most transparent manner. She uses 'governing regime' constantly, while it seems she means the federal state, and sometimes one gets the impression that authoritarianism equals violence and repression (e.g. p. 183). There is also the occasional error, such as when she writes that governor Maximino Avila Camacho of Puebla was succeeded in 1944 by Carlos Betancourt, while in fact he was succeeded in 1941 by Gonzalo Bautista. Perhaps the most contentious claim of the book is that the countryside was a laboratory of state-violence to be applied later to urban Mexico. Not so much because that might not be the case (although there are indications that point in a different direction), but because McCormick's study does not engage in systematic comparison. It seems that much work still needs to be done to formulate firm conclusions.

### **Revolution from without, discontent from within**

Understanding how distinct scales of social reality are intertwined is the central research object of Renata Keller's excellent book on how the Cuban revolution affected Mexico's international positioning and its internal dynamics, and vice versa. The complex relations between international and domestic pressures structure the book from beginning to end, paying attention to particularly important events for Mexico's foreign policy and internal politics. Put differently, this study is about Mexico in the Cold War and about the Cold War in Mexico.

*Mexico's Cold War* is the most clearly written and neatly organized book of the three. It follows a chronological order, starting with an outstanding chapter that takes the reader from the Revolution to the end of the 1950s. The following five chapters have clear objectives and concise conclusions. Some chapters tend to focus more on foreign policy and international relations, others primarily on Mexico's domestic affairs conditioned and influenced by the global Cold War. The book is based on extensive archival research in Mexico, the U.S. and Cuba, and on a wide range of press outlets. The material from the Mexican archives is mainly made up by reports written by secret agents. Since the author is interested in the framing of (inter)national events and developments, a process increasingly fashioned by Cold War anti-communist rhetoric, she has not only mined newspapers and magazines, but also examined how the press itself became involved in Cold War polarization. She shows that the director of the left-wing magazine *Política* was closely watched by government agents, that journalists were paid to exaggerate communist involvement in social protests, but also that Fidel Castro set up *Prensa Latina* as one of his most 'effective weapons in his war with the United States' (p. 85). In conceptual terms, Keller's book is less explicit and ambitious. It is surprising, for example, that she does not engage the broader Cold War in Latin America literature more substantially.

Having said that, Keller makes a number of convincing and well-documented arguments. Her initial one is that the Cuban revolution started the Cold War in Mexico. During the 1950s, social and political conflicts about the legacy and the status of the Mexican revolution (labour rights, democracy, redistribution, land) were, in her view, exclusively rooted in domestic affairs and disconnected from wider international developments. Castro's armed revolution and decisive reform projects changed that. From then onwards, Mexicans could no longer assess their own situation without Cuba as a point of reference. The international tensions around Cuba appealed to Mexican nationalism, and the government soon acknowledged that 'external problems were causing internal unrest' (p. 67). Subsequent events such as the U.S.-led Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961) and the missile crisis (October 1962) further polarized Mexico and triggered opposing interventions by politicians, peasants and students. For some, among them former president Lázaro Cárdenas, Cuba became a source of inspiration and solidarity, for others, on the right, a threat. In her second key argument, Keller convincingly shows that '[I]n resorting to force, the Mexican government and the conservative sectors of society introduced a new, violent aspect to Mexico's Cold War' (p. 127). The killing of Rubén Jaramillo, examined in detail by McCormick, is mentioned in this context.

For Mexican president López Mateos (1958-1964) the entanglement of international and domestic conflict posed great challenges, especially since the U.S. exercised pressure to toe the line in condemning and isolating Cuba. To do so would, however, further boost domestic discontent. Wholeheartedly supporting the new Cuban regime, on the other hand, would seriously undermine

Mexico's crucial relationship with the U.S. Making full use of archival sources, Keller ably demonstrates how the Mexican government publicly endorsed Cuba's right to self-determination, opposed OAS policies, but secretly adopted policies against the Castro regime and hence pleased the U.S. Doubts in the U.S. government about Mexico's foreign policy definitely disappeared after López Mateos sided with the U.S. during the 1962 missile crisis. By then the Kennedy administration had understood that Mexico's domestic concerns required a unique foreign policy.

Mexico's publicly professed solidarity with Cuba was thus less a question of doctrinal principle than Realpolitik, more performance than substance, but it did substantially increase the country's role in global affairs. It also turned Mexico (City) into a centre of Cold War intelligence, spies, and intrigue. One of the most interesting findings of the book is that Mexico's duplicitous policies towards Cuba received a response in kind (Keller calls them 'equally utilitarian', p. 85): praise for Mexico's public position, but suspicion, espionage and support for leftist groups under the table. Despite the rhetoric, relations between Mexico and the U.S. deepened, as the latter recognized the usefulness of the diplomatic and intelligence channel to Cuba through Mexico.

In a remarkable section of the book Keller describes how both countries agreed not to pursue a criminal investigation into Lee Harvey Oswald's visits to the Cuban embassy in Mexico City a few months before the Kennedy assassination, acting on unequivocal orders from Washington. The strongly worded conclusion reads: 'Both governments worked together to give the appearance of investigating the murder while actually discarding or hiding evidence that the Cubans might have been involved' (p. 147). Later Keller even states that Cuba's diplomatic presence in Mexico 'may have given the Cubans the opportunity to encourage Oswald to assassinate Kennedy' (p. 236). The alleged reason was to avoid international armed escalation at all cost.

Mexico's balancing act of ambiguous or contradictory domestic and international policies did not last long. With the hardening of the Cold War and the arrival of Díaz Ordáz to the presidency in 1964, domestic conflicts intensified. The Mexican political elite and the security agencies became anti-communist believers, who turned home-grown problems into communist conspiracies and responded with force and repression. It was then, Keller argues, that Mexico's Cold War became a 'dirty war', which would last until the early 1980s. The book pays attention to rural guerrillas and insurgencies, the 1968 student movement and the urban guerrillas of Guadalajara and elsewhere. Keller again stresses that it was the rigid closure of the state, its unwillingness to negotiate, its blindness to the social causes of radicalizing discontent and its fixation in seeing communist conspiracies everywhere that put the vicious circle of the dirty war in motion. In that sense, her book confirms the thrust of works by McCormick, Padilla (2008) and Aviña (2014), although they may differ on periodization.

Just as in the case of McCormick, Keller relies heavily on reports by Mexican intelligence agents. Over the last decade, studying the files of the Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS) and the DFS has benefited historical research greatly. However, these sources also pose significant challenges, most importantly about their evidence base.<sup>4</sup> This probably applies above all to the types of reports used for this study in which claims are made about regime opponents' alleged connections to (international) communist organizations. The author is careful about this and writes that reports speculate about, or claim and suggest certain 'facts': about the Cárdenas-led Movimiento Liberación Nacional distributing guerrilla manuals to students (p. 111), 'unbridled leftist agitation in Sinaloa' (p. 111), links from particular individuals to student uprisings in Puebla and Michoacán (p. 119), a guerrilla leader able to mobilize 25 thousand men in Chihuahua (p. 155), a Cuban-owned property of twenty thousand hectares in Oaxaca for guerrilla training (p. 181), etc. Keller is aware of the limitations, as she admits that some reports were 'obviously false or exaggerated' (p. 115). She even found that false evidence planted by some intelligence officers was reported as the truth by others (p. 195).

That is why at the time it was difficult to know what role international communists played in Mexico's political activism. Would that be why Keller writes that president Díaz Ordaz '*chose* to believe questionable evidence' [my emphasis], because it supported what he wanted to believe, and hence justify his harsh political agenda? Keller struggles with this issue, as she also suggests that 'Mexico's leaders misinterpreted' what was happening due to unreliable intelligence (p. 230). Did agents write what their bosses wanted to read, or were they incompetent? Did politics trump intelligence? Although Keller rightfully argues at the start of the book that 'perceptions' hugely matter for understanding policy choices (independently of what was actually happening), since they reveal what 'Mexico's leaders *thought* was happening' (p. 7), I believe it is still valid to ask if the author could have consulted other sources to corroborate or disprove some of these claims or perceptions. It would seem that regional archives (or interviews) could have provided additional evidence. In addition, McCormick's analysis of several intelligence reports about Morelos indicate that agents understood very well what was causing the discontent among peasants and workers, which implies that under other circumstances agents may have consciously opted to please their bosses with reports about communist conspiracies.

### **Local assassination, imperial power**

In the last chapter of her fascinating study, Keller examines the so-called Corpus Christi massacre in June 1971 in Mexico City, in which the Halcones, a U.S.-trained paramilitary group, violently repressed a student demonstration, leaving fifty dead and hundreds wounded. Worried about the possible fall out,

the U.S. embassy drafted a contingency plan, upon which 'Mexican officials stepped in to make sure that the U.S. training of Mexican paramilitaries remained hidden' (p. 224). This infamous incident goes to the heart of *Eclipse of the Assassins*, Russell Bartley and Sylvia Erickson Bartley's voluminous book that deals with an equally infamous episode in Mexico's Cold War: the assassination of Manuel Buendía in May 1984, at the time one of Mexico's most prominent journalists.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways, the Bartleys have written an impressive book. It brings together the polished worlds of presidents and statesmen in their international encounters with the dirty netherworlds of spies, assassins, corrupt security agents and drug traffickers in a comprehensive analysis. The readers are taken to Los Angeles courtrooms, secret negotiations between CIA agents and the political elite of Michoacán, the corridors of power in Mexico City, the family home of Manuel Buendía, and the battlefields of Central America. We meet a shady German arms dealer, a pragmatic prosecutor, prominent drug traffickers, ruthless police officers, undercover CIA agents, and numerous friends and foes from Buendía's journalistic milieu. *Eclipse of the Assassins* is based on the integration of a great variety of sources such as newspapers, formal interviews, fascinating trial documents (including depositions, grand jury testimonies, transcripts of court proceedings etc.), intense communications with people (in)directly involved in the case, and broad contextual readings. This could only have been accomplished with an admirable, almost zealous, dedication to the project during a period spanning 30 years!

It also takes the reader along a journey that moves from the analysis of the murder of Buendía and its widest ramifications to a narrative of how the investigation itself evolved over all these years. The latter includes information about where they travelled, who they spoke to and why, the difficulties in gaining trust of informants, ethical dilemmas, and, increasingly so in the second part of the book, about the implications for the authors themselves. Finally, the Bartleys succeed in building a strong case that discredits the conclusions of the official Buendía investigations as the latter appear to have aimed at eclipsing the real motives and forces behind the assassination rather than at revealing them. I like the theatre metaphors used in chapters 5, 6 and 7 to demonstrate how the Buendía case was framed to conceal the truth with words, reports, declarations, investigations, pronounced leads and hidden leaks. It is difficult to read this and not think of how the current Mexican government is managing the Ayotzinapa tragedy: to produce hundreds of thousands of pages allegedly to determine 'the historical truth', but really to conceal it.

Moreover, the authors 'explain' why Buendía was murdered by placing it in a 'proper historical perspective' (p. 11), and as such the book uses the Buendía case as a prism to examine an important episode of the Cold War in the Western hemisphere. Seen from that perspective, the book complements Keller's *Mexico's Cold War* very well as it shifts attention from Cuba as an articulating

point to understanding U.S.-Mexican relations toward Central America, particularly Nicaragua, and from the first part of Mexico's Cold War to the last.

So what is the key finding of this book of approximately 180 thousand words? In May 1984, the influential journalist and columnist Manuel Buendía was brutally shot in the back in the centre of Mexico City. He had contacts in high places, and his pen was feared. Immediately after the assassination, the director of the DFS, José Antonio Zorrilla, who appears in the McCormick book as a junior agent, took control of the crime site and the investigation against all official regulations. The assassination sent shock waves through the nation and triggered an avalanche of speculations about motives and culprits. Buendía had many enemies, and only the most cynical observers made the case that it was not a politically motivated crime. The authors of this book were interested in the case from the beginning and travelled to Mexico for their first field inquiry in March 1985. A month before that trip, Enrique Camarena, an undercover DEA agent was abducted, tortured and murdered, an incident that deeply affected the relationships between the U.S. and Mexico, as it was widely believed that Camarena had been killed on the orders of Mexico's most important drug cartel that operated in collusion with the DFS. Not much later, major drug kingpins were behind bars and the DFS was dismantled. The U.S. government used the Camarena affair to push Mexico hard in foreign and economic policies, at a time when the country was stumbling from one economic crisis to the next.

In a painstaking investigative process, the authors along with other journalists in Mexico and the U.S. became convinced that the Buendía and Camarena killings were linked, and much of the book is about the Bartleys trying to put the different pieces together. The most important element is that the interests behind both killings go beyond criminal interests and reach into the political domains on both sides of the border. In the mid-1980s, Mexico's one party regime confronted serious challenges, while the Reagan administration was deeply involved in a Cold War battle against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Buendía and DEA agent Camarena had each separately discovered that the CIA was running a dark network, which involved Mexican and Central American drug traffickers that imported cocaine into the U.S. and facilitated the movement of arms to the contras. Nicaraguan contras were trained at a Mexican ranch owned by one of the country's most notorious capos. CIA pilots flew many of the planes. The DFS functioned as the go-between, and hence involved the Ministry of the Interior. The Mexican army provided the necessary protection, and got a bite of the pie. Since the overriding concern of the CIA was the anti-Sandinista project, it trumped the DEA's task of combating drug trafficking, and covertly incorporated (or pressured) parts of the Mexican state into subservience. Buendía had found out about the CIA-contra-drugs-DFS connection, which seriously questioned Mexican sovereignty, while Camarena learned that the CIA had infiltrated the DEA and sabotaged its work so as to interfere with the clandestine contra-DFS-traffickers network. They

knew too much and were eliminated on the orders of the U.S. with Mexican complicity.

Later official investigations attempted to limit criminal responsibility to the dirty connections between drug traffickers, secret agents and corrupt police, leaving out the (geo)political ramifications.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the book the authors conclude: 'The preponderance of evidence ... persuades us beyond any reasonable doubt that Manuel Buendía was slain on behalf of the United States because of what he had learned about U.S.-Mexico collusion with narcotics traffickers, international arms dealers, and other governments in support of Reagan administration efforts to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.... Camarena was ... killed for the same reason' (pp. 402-403).

A crucial step in getting to this conclusion was the authors' engagement with a former CIA agent, Lawrence Victor Harrison, who for a long time had worked under deep cover in the Mexican netherworld of the DFS, drug trafficking and political repression. He later became disenchanted with the agency and in conversations with the authors eventually spilled the beans about the relationships between organized crime, security agencies, law enforcement, and political interests in Washington, Mexico, and beyond. In his mind Buendía was murdered on the orders of the architect of the Iran-contra network, Oliver North (p. 331)! Unwinding the contacts and conversations between the Bartleys and Harrison takes place over more than ten years and occupies more than one hundred pages in the book.

Harrison's story is fascinating, there are loads of interesting data in the book, and the conclusion is as depressing as it is important, although I believe it tends to overstate the role of Mexico as merely a satellite of U.S. imperial power, and ignore the duplicitous games examined by Keller, which gives the government a larger degree of agency. In the end, *Eclipse of the Assassins* is more a book about the American side of the story.

But this is not the book's main problem. It is that all its positives have a down side. Taking the reader in many directions sometimes leads to excessively long ruminations about contextual developments and sidelines, undermining the focus of the analysis. More importantly, reflections on the investigative process itself have a growing and irritating tendency to be about the authors themselves. Do we really want to know in which hotels they stay and what they have for breakfast? The authors often reproduce their own earlier (newspaper) publications inserted in the text without proper introduction. They tend to write about their contributions and insights in a self-congratulatory manner, occasionally from a moral high ground. This reaches the apex with a screenshot of their computer (p. 377), which allegedly proves that they are victims of digital intimidation because of their research findings. When asked if they are not concerned about their own safety, they say yes, but quickly add that it will not detain them given 'the transcendence of the case' (p. 191).

It reads as if the authors are continuously trying to carve out for themselves a legitimate space for their lifelong work. They are harsh about the work of

others. A book by a Mexican journalist is disqualified as ‘episodic, not analytical, with emphasis on the sensationalist aspects of Mexican drug trafficking’, and full of ‘errors, inaccuracies, and lack of perspective....’ (p. 426). There are indeed factual inaccuracies in that book, but the Bartleys themselves write that the Zapatista uprising took place after the assassination of presidential candidate Colosio in 1994 (p. 25), which is not true, and that somebody had a meeting with president Salinas in April 1986 (p. 260), while the latter only came to power at the end of 1988. As the book progresses the authors write and think more as criminal prosecutors than as historians interested in outlining the bigger historical context (see e.g. their treatment of Anabel Hernández, p. 397).

Their emphatic search for recognition and accomplishment is likely related to the authors’ decades-long quest and enormous investments in terms of time, energy, creativity, thinking and hard work. But herein also lies the book’s ultimately most unfortunate feature: a few years before it was finally published the fundamental arguments of the book had become widely known. In October 2013, former DEA agents involved in the Camarena investigation came out publicly in interviews with U.S. and Mexican media, in which they laid out CIA involvement in the case, its connections to drug trafficking, the conflicts in Central America, and the Buendía murder. The influential Mexican magazine *Proceso* led with the story for weeks. A retired senior Mexican intelligence official came out to corroborate the facts. Mexican journalist Esquivel (2014), criticized by the Bartleys, published a small book about it. So the core argument of *Eclipse of the Assassins* was already available to a wide audience when the book was finally published in 2015. Decades of research and writing had suddenly been overtaken by mass media outlets and the informants the authors had relied on so much.

The books reviewed here vary in specific subject matter, analytical perspective and narrative styles, but they all firmly establish the Cold War as a valid and useful framework of analysis of Mexican politics and society from the late 1950s to the 1980s. Global ideological polarization, competing geopolitical interests and armed conflicts shaped the (foreign) policy options of statesmen, but equally conditioned the opportunities and constraints of diverse political actors, secret agencies, drug traffickers, students, peasants and workers across Mexico.

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2012). His work has appeared in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, *Conflict & Society*, *Minerva*, and *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*.

## Notes

1. The books build on some previous studies such as Alegre (2013) and Herrera Calderón and Cedillo (2012).
2. The author suggests the notion of 'low-intensity dirty war' to allow for the ebbs and flows across this prolonged period, see McCormick (2017, pp. 59-60).
3. See also Padilla (2008), which I reviewed in this journal, no. 88, April 2010.
4. See for this issue also the highly interesting special issue of the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2013.
5. See Freije's excellent article (2015) on Buendía and other columnists and their often ambiguous role in Mexico's changing political environment.
6. A book that strongly suggests the involvement of the top of the Mexican political elite in the Buendía case, but that is hesitant to involve American geopolitical interests, was published in 2012 by journalist Granados Chapa shortly after the author's death.

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