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## Declining Life Expectancy: Brought to You by Washington

By Nick Alexandrov  
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“One of the greatest stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that we doubled the life expectancy of adults,” Terry Fulmer, head of the John A. Hartford Foundation, remarked recently. In the last quarter-century, Washington has helped fight this trend.

Consider the dark news *Health Affairs* delivered this month. Mexico saw a “decline in life expectancy from 2005 to 2010 among men nationwide,” mainly from “large increases in homicide mortality” dating to 2006.

That was the year Felipe Calderón won an “election marred by allegations of voter fraud,” Kristin Bricker explained. In his six-year term, he deployed 45,000 troops per year throughout Mexico—more than doubling his predecessor’s annual average of 19,293, according to George W. Grayson.

Battling drug traffickers was the stated aim of the surge, which soon yielded other results. One, Frank Koughan observed in *Mother Jones*, was that “complaints to the Mexican National Commission of Human Rights...skyrocketed, from 182 in 2006 to 1,230 in 2008.” There were 1,415 complaints in 2010. Two years later, Human Rights Watch reported that Calderón’s policies had “resulted in a significant increase in killings, torture, and other abuses,” like abductions. “Torture and ill treatment during detention are generalized in Mexico, and occur in a context of impunity,” the UN special envoy on torture, Juan Méndez, stated last March. “There’s a very clear correlation between the increased deployment of the military and increased human rights violations,” Center Prodh, a Mexican human rights group, emphasized.

And we can draw other connections—for example, between Washington’s support and the brutality just described. “The United States was an eager participant in the militarization of Mexico’s counterdrug policy, prompting and supporting it every step of the way,” wrote Laurie Freeman and Jorge Luis Sierra. They were describing the decades before Calderón. Then in 2005, the U.S., Mexican and Canadian governments arranged the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP). This plan, Peter Watt explains, “was neither a treaty nor a legal agreement”—thus “never debated publicly”—but was a means of “armoring NAFTA,” as Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon put it.

The Mérida Initiative, which Bush launched in 2007 and Obama has carried out, served the same end. “Between FY2008 and FY2015, Congress appropriated almost \$2.5 billion for [its] programs in Mexico,” notes the Congressional Research Service. As Calderón raked in U.S. taxpayer money, Obama praised his “extraordinary courage.” Overseeing a slaughter so intense it cuts life expectancy requires a certain valor, there can be no question.

Nor can we doubt the constructiveness of U.S. policy elsewhere. Look at Russia in the ’90s. As Abraham Ascher notes, “Yeltsin adopted the radical proposals—known as ‘shock therapy’—of his newly appointed minister of economics and finance, Yegor Gaidar.” The treatment “had come highly recommended by Western economists and the prestigious International Monetary Fund,” write David M. Kotz and Fred Weir. Soon Russia had become “an economic and political dependency” of both the IMF and the U.S. Treasury, in Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski’s assessment.

“Shortly after the beginning of economic reforms,” a team of scholars wrote in *Population Research and Policy Review*, Russian life expectancy nosedived. In 1994, it was 57.6 years for men—down from 63.5 in 1991. For women, the drop was from 74.3 to 71.2 years over the same stretch. “These decreases are beyond the peacetime experience of any industrialized country,”

the authors emphasized. “Thus, the shock effect of ‘shock therapy’ was achieved, but no therapy was provided.”

As Ascher points out, “once the impact of the reforms became evident [Russia’s] legislature had second thoughts,” and started rejecting “one after another of the government’s reform measures.” Yeltsin, determined to have his way, “took the drastic step of ordering the dissolution of the legislature” in September 1993, then sent “military forces, including tanks, to surround the building” when lawmakers refused to disband on command.

The events “destroyed the long-standing taboo against the use of brute force in political struggles in Moscow” (Lilia Shevtsova), and “dealt a wounding, possibly fatal, blow to Russia’s historic and exceedingly fragile democratization experiment” (Stephen F. Cohen). Ultimately Yeltsin “became what many called a ‘superpresident’ with an enhanced authority that in some ways resembled that of the tsars,” Ascher concludes.

Or perhaps these scholars overreact. Maybe Yeltsin’s was “a democrat’s coup,” likely to “help consolidate Russian democracy” and thus met, appropriately, with “joy in Western capitals,” as the *New York Times* cheered. “I support him fully,” President Clinton announced. We can imagine how the current, or next, administration would react were Putin to pull something similar.

Clinton, meanwhile, also backed sanctions on Iraq—“the cruelest sanctions in the history of international governance,” Joy Gordon argues, since they shattered “the health, education, and basic well-being of almost the entire Iraqi population.” She further points out that Washington “exercised a singular influence in determining these policies, and often did so in the face of vehement opposition from the majority of the Security Council, UN agencies, and the UN General Assembly.”

The UN estimated in 1995 that the sanctions had killed over half a million children—“worth it,” in Madeleine Albright’s infamous *60 Minutes* assessment—one factor prompting two successive UN Humanitarian Coordinators in Iraq, Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, to resign. Halliday concluded that the sanctions were “criminally flawed and genocidal;” von Sponeck concurred, finding evidence of “conscious violation of human rights and humanitarian law on the part of governments represented in the Security Council, first and foremost those of the United States and the United Kingdom.”

These governments helped reverse Iraq’s rising life expectancy. It climbed “from 44 years in 1950-55 to 63.9 in 1985-90,” Bassam Yousif explains, but “then began to decline with the onset of economic sanctions,” according to Scott Harding and Kathryn Libal. For women, life expectancy plummeted from 65.2 years in 1990 to 60.8 a decade later.

Then the U.S. attacked. The UN noted that “the ongoing conflict in Iraq had a direct effect on its total life expectancy.” In 2004, Iraq’s interim health minister likened his country’s public health services—formerly among the region’s best—to those “of Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan.” Harding and Libal, in 2010, reported 57 years as Iraq’s overall “life expectancy rate at birth,”

while for men that rate was 48 years—“reflecting their risk of dying prematurely from violent causes.”

Now compare this review of Mexico, Russia and Iraq to mainstream commentary. “Promoting democracy and defending human rights” abroad were chief U.S. goals after the Cold War, *The Atlantic*’s Peter Beinart asserts. Robert Samuelson thinks “faith in the power of shared prosperity” drives U.S. diplomacy. Comforting fairy tales. We must ignore them to understand Washington’s true legacy.