Drugs to Death in a Political Cartoon: An Oversimplification?

As the more stable counterpart to a volatile southern neighbor, the United States has always had a wary outlook towards Mexico. In recent years, the increase in illegal immigration, the unpredictable economies in both countries, and the issues resulting from drug use and trade have added tension to the already taut relationship. Blame flows easily and lands on various subjects – each government, drug cartels, drug users, and more. However, in a recent political cartoon posted by David Kurtzman (see Figure 1), various rhetorical strategies are used to portray the cartoonist’s opinion that blame should be limited to one party: the drug cartels. Through the use of color, stereotypes, and the pathos connected with images of death, the cartoonist blames the violent Latin American drug cartels for Mexico’s problems and undermines the legitimacy of the attempts of the Mexican government, as represented by the immobile piñata, to solve the drug issue.

In the cartoon, the drug cartels are represented by the figure on the right, with a dark black shirt and a menacing face and stance. The color scheme of the figure, as compared to...
the gaudy piñata and the white, ethereal skulls, makes the drug cartels an image of
destruction and danger.

The sheer physical size of the figure also exaggerates the responsibility of those
cartels for the destruction to Mexico. The cartoon ignores the presence of the approximately
25 million people in the United States who are illicit drug users and thus create a market for
the products of the drug cartels (marijuana and cocaine, for example), instead perhaps over-
simplifying the situation to portray the drug problem as a one-dimensional, clear-cut, and
violent issue. This message, however, is inaccurate. It may be easier for an American
audience, the original audience for the cartoon, to accept an opinion that completely ignores
the blame due to the consumers of the drugs sold by the cartels or other potential recipients
like corrupt police forces. The oversimplification is also dangerous because it clearly
separates Mexico from the United States and does not acknowledge the mutual dependence
and interaction, for better or for worse, between them. By creating a foreign, violent-looking
figure as “Mexican,” there is no attempt to foster a sense of complicity, unity, or
responsibility in the audience.

That figure of the drug cartels is possibly a surprising and familiar one for an
American audience. In the ongoing media frenzy and public outrage over steroid usage in
baseball, exacerbated by the publication of the Mitchell Report, various baseball players have
been represented as evil, menacing, muscled men with bats. The subconscious mental
connection with illegal and decried activities, an apropos acknowledgement of American
cultural kairos, perpetuates the portrayal of the drug cartels as the sole owner of the blame
for the violence and death in Mexico. The pathos involved with this overblown portrayal
uses the scare tactic; the audience’s fear of the dark colors and frightening male figure assist the cartoonist’s objective of blaming the drug cartels for Mexico’s wanton violence.

The color scheme and setup of the background for the cartoon are also strategic choices on the part of the cartoonist. The landscape is barren, marked primarily by a dead and blasé tree, two indistinct cacti, and the dry ground. Even the sky is ominous; the clouds converge over the drug cartel figure, and the colors are hazy and smoky, as if rising from the dusty ground. The infertility of the landscape and the obvious lack of abundant natural resources occurring at the same time as the drug cartel’s mutilation of the piñata lends many negative connotations and associations to the drug cartel, further implicating the figure in Mexico’s issues. This rhetoric, however, is a *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy; although the barren landscape and the drug cartels coincide, the correlation does not necessarily imply causation. Although the drug cartel figure may appear to be at fault for the destruction of the piñata figure and, by extension, the environment of the political cartoon, in reality there is no evidence provided that fairly places all blame on the drug cartels.

The cartoon also, besides overtly placing blame on the drug cartels for the generalized problems and violence in Mexico, underestimates the extent and power of the Mexican government to battle the acknowledged power of the cartels. The imagery associated with “Mexico,” in the figure of the piñata, is the most obvious connection to belittling the effects of the Mexican government against the drug cartels. The piñata is immobile, tied to a tree. It hangs suspended in the air, as if it cannot control its own motion or defenses. Its face is blank and that of a donkey – a stupid, impotent animal – suggesting a lack of intelligence or even intense feeling like that seen in the face of the drug cartel figure. This blankness seems wrong because tiny skulls are pouring out of the figure, whose stomach has just been
savagely punctured, but no reactive emotion is exhibited. Ironically, piñatas are usually used as lighthearted games at birthday parties for children. The lack of a typical mask on the drug cartel figure’s face makes the destruction intentional and more malicious. The implication of the destruction being an easy, game-like pursuit for the drug cartels further attempts to persuade the audience to see the culpability of the drug cartels in comparison to the weakness of the government in Mexico.

The vacant gaze of the piñata is mirrored by the blankness of the landscape. The dead, nondescript plant life and the brown earth are seemingly disconnected from the free-hanging Mexico piñata, suggesting that the government has no control or direct connection with the country at large. In fact, however, Mexico’s president, Felipe Calderón, has taken the first step against the pervasiveness of drug violence that no president has dared to take in the past. He has cracked down on drug dealers by jailing them, sending them to the United States to be jailed, and decriminalizing small quantities of drugs in an effort to lower profits for the cartels. These efforts, while perhaps unpopular and not always effective, are the first attempts to fight back against the power of cartels and the violence that erupts as a result of the drug trade. Their reduction in this cartoon to a donkey with a flat affect suspended and isolated in midair is an exaggeration and a miscommunication of the truth.

Furthermore, Mexico is homogenized by various images in the cartoon. An overly commercialized and Americanized symbol, the piñata, de-emphasizes Mexican culture’s diversity and vitality. By characterizing an entire, diverse country as a small, powerless object, the cartoonist constructs *ethos* for himself by apparently being able to make large generalizations about complex issues, implying that he has an authoritative and encompassing grasp of the subject.
Similarly, the stereotypical plants of the desert, cacti, again indicate a lack of diverse resources and inherent beauty in Mexican life. The lack of resources and, perhaps, their misuse (one tree is used to string up Mexico itself) indicate that the Mexican government is powerless to stand up to the dominant drug cartel figure. The gaudy brightness of the piñata lends further weight to that claim, by appearing as falsely cheerful in the hazy environment and next to the white skulls and the black cartel figure.

Those skulls further serve to homogenize the Mexican population. The skulls have a shimmering halo around them, portraying them as martyr figures and innocent deaths, pouring out of Mexico’s belly without being able to stop. This imagery further demonizes the hulking drug cartel figure, but it does not acknowledge that many, if not a majority, of the deaths associated with the drug war are actually those directly involved: members of opposing cartels, policemen or hospital workers, for example. The cartoonist uses pathos in portraying the skulls – the idea of violent death and the loss of one’s individuality is frightening and sobering. The rhetorical device is similar to pictures of devastation from natural disasters or genocides: widespread and indiscriminate death as represented through an image. The victimized and non-individualized skulls characterize the entire Mexican population as weak and victimized. The fact that the skulls fall out of the piñata suggest that the death already existed in Mexico but was just hidden by gaudy colors and flimsy covering; this condescending criticism of Mexico has no evidence in the cartoon and thus seems unfounded. Also, there are a host of other problems at large in Mexico: a faltering economy, the swine flu epidemic, and immigration issues as always. The cartoonist’s choice to ignore those issues and to focus on the inability of the government to stop just one (admittedly, a
large one), is overly reducing the responsibilities of the government and the various nationwide problems that exist.

In this visually simple but subtly complex image from David Kurtzman, many stereotypes and oversimplifications are used as rhetorical strategies by the cartoonist. The color scheme of the piñata, the drug cartel figure, the landscape, and the pile of skulls all serve to place blame for Mexico’s troubles solely on the drug cartels. The use, and perhaps misuse, of pathos, ethos, and logical fallacies all aid the cartoonist in refusing to acknowledge some legitimacy on the part of the Mexican government in bravely – and sometimes successfully – attempting to eradicate drug turf wars from the country. Such a large task cannot be accomplished quickly or cleanly, and one hulking figure cannot possibly hold all the blame for creating a heartrending pile of haloed skulls. The cartoonist, and the world, must look elsewhere in an effort to truly begin to solve this international problem.

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**Works Cited and Consulted**
