

## Interview with CENFAD Spring 2026 Speaker

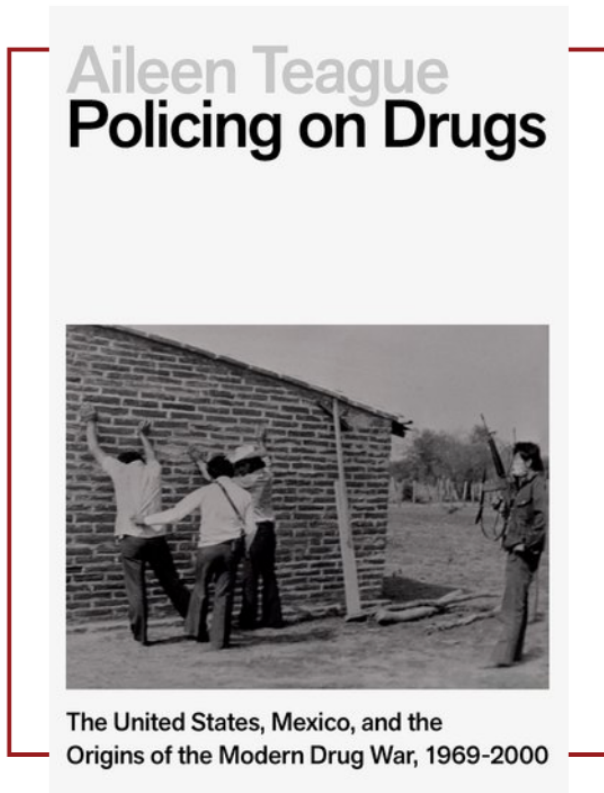
### Dr. Aileen Teague, Texas A&M University, author of *Policing on Drugs: The United States, Mexico, and the Origins of the Modern Drugs War, 1969-2000*

**Editor's note:** Following her January 29 talk at CENFAD, I spoke with Dr. Aileen Teague about the persistence of the war on drugs in U.S. foreign policy.

**Dr. Aileen Teague:** Thank you for inviting me, Marcella.

**MAT:** Let me start by asking about your sources and methodology. When we consider Latin American domestic politics and U.S. foreign policy together, the story is often very multifaceted and nuanced. And, as you note in the introduction, the sources are often incomplete or even compromised. How did you deal with that? And what does it mean, in practice, to “triangulate” sources effectively?

**AT:** One of the challenges of writing this book was exactly the problem you identify: the fact that we are dealing simultaneously with U.S. foreign policy and Latin American (specifically Mexican) domestic politics, each with its own institutional cultures, silences, incentives, and archival limits. I had to accept that no single archive or national perspective could fully explain how drug policing worked across borders. U.S. sources are extensive but self-justificatory, and in some cases, they emphasize initiative and control while



**Marcella Aline Toledo:** Hello Dr. Teague! Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today, and again for your presentation at CENFAD.

minimizing uncertainty and failure. Mexican sources are far more fragmented. Security records are incomplete, often inaccessible, and rarely designed to make power legible. Rather than treating these limitations as obstacles to be overcome, I treated them as part of the historical problem itself.

Triangulation, in practice, meant reading across different kinds of sources and taking their contradictions seriously. Diplomatic cables, congressional hearings, press accounts, internal evaluations, and retrospective interviews often described the same events in very different ways. I did not try to adjudicate a single authoritative version. Instead, I asked what those differences revealed about institutional incentives, domestic political constraints, and efforts to manage responsibility. Silence and vagueness were often as revealing as explicit claims. By tracing policies and practices across time, agencies, and national boundaries, patterns emerge even when individual sources are partial or compromised. The gaps in the record matter because the drug war itself depended on ambiguity, deniability, and uneven visibility of state power.

**MAT:** You also argue that many narratives about Mexican drug violence are either simplistic or sensationalized, and that much of the scholarship on militarization centers

Washington. Why do you think these narratives have been more persistent?

**AT:** These narratives persist largely because of how knowledge about Mexican drug violence has been produced and circulated. Media coverage and policy debate have tended to favor dramatic moments of crisis, cartels, body counts, spectacular violence, which encourages simplified stories that detach violence from long term institutional and political processes. Those frames are easy to reproduce and travel well internationally, especially in U.S. audiences that already expect Mexico to appear as a site of disorder or failure. In the scholarly literature, a related problem is that militarization is often told from Washington outward. U.S. archives are more accessible, better organized, and easier to work with, so it is tempting to treat U.S. strategy as the primary driver and Mexican institutions as reactive. That perspective obscures the extent to which Mexican officials actively shaped drug policy, pursued their own institutional agendas, and used U.S. cooperation selectively within domestic power struggles. Both tendencies flatten the overall narrative. They make violence appear sudden, external, or pathological rather than the outcome of decades of state building through policing and security institutions. By recentralizing Mexican domestic politics and tracing how drug control became embedded

in everyday governance, I try to show that what looks like chaos is in fact deeply structured, historically contingent, and politically produced.

**MAT:** *Policing on Drugs* emphasizes how drug policy relied heavily on militarization and the use of force. It obvious to me that these policies also feed into a kind of cycle that connects to another major issue: immigration. Violence produces displacement, which drives migration, prompting stricter border responses and ultimately straining diplomatic relations. How do you see that dynamic?

**AT:** I agree with that framing, and I would emphasize that this is not an unintended side effect so much as a structural dynamic that has been built into U.S. drug policy for decades. From the 1970s onward, drug control relied on coercive policing and militarized force to manage social and political problems that neither government was willing to address directly. That approach produced instability at predictable points, particularly at the local and regional level, where enforcement was most intense and institutions were weakest. What the book tries to show is that violence and displacement were not deviations from policy goals. They were foreseeable consequences of using force as a primary tool of governance. As drug policing expanded

into rural areas, border regions, and urban peripheries in Mexico, it disrupted livelihoods and social networks long before the dramatic spikes in violence that gained international attention. Migration followed those disruptions. It reflected not only fear of violence, but loss of economic security and trust in local authority.

The U.S. response treated migration as a separate problem, to be managed through border enforcement rather than understood as connected to earlier security policies. This reinforced a feedback loop. Drug enforcement contributed to displacement. Displacement intensified migration. Migration justified further border militarization. Each stage deepened bilateral tensions while allowing policymakers to compartmentalize responsibility. What gets lost in that cycle is the historical continuity. Drug control, policing, and migration governance developed together as overlapping systems of control. When we separate them analytically, we miss how force was used across domains to manage movement, labor, and political risk. Seeing them together helps explain why both drug policy and migration policy have been so durable, despite repeated evidence that they generate the very crises they claim to solve.

**MAT:** Your book highlights three interconnected dynamics, including the externalization of U.S. drug policy and the

increasing use of militarized enforcement. I was particularly struck by the issue of sovereignty: how Mexican assertions of sovereignty were often read by U.S. officials as signs of corruption, which then justified further intervention, therefore creating another cycle. Can we consider this as part of a longer tradition of paternalistic U.S. policy towards Latin America?

**AT:** Yes, I think it is best understood as part of a much longer tradition of paternalistic U.S. policy toward Latin America, though one that took on new forms through drug control. What is distinctive in the drug war context is how deeply sovereignty itself became reframed as a problem to be managed. Mexican assertions of legal or operational autonomy were frequently interpreted by U.S. officials not as legitimate political claims, but as evidence of corruption, incapacity, or bad faith. That interpretation then justified further intervention, surveillance, and pressure, which in turn made genuine sovereignty harder to exercise. This is a familiar pattern in the hemispheric relationship. Historically, U.S. policymakers have often claimed to respect sovereignty in principle while treating it as conditional in practice. In the drug war, that conditionality hinged on cooperation as defined by Washington. When Mexican officials resisted certain forms of U.S. presence, questioned intelligence

sharing, or tried to assert control over enforcement priorities, those actions were rarely read as political negotiation. Instead, they were moralized and pathologized.

The book shows how this dynamic hardened over time. By the late twentieth century, drug control had become a powerful lens through which all Mexican state behavior was evaluated. Sovereignty no longer appeared as a neutral legal concept, but as something that had to be earned and constantly proven through compliance. That logic helped sustain militarization, because intervention could be framed as assistance rather than intrusion, and resistance as corruption rather than governance. What makes this dynamic so enduring is that it absolves U.S. policy of responsibility for its own consequences. If violence or institutional failure persists, the explanation is displaced onto Mexican institutions rather than traced back to the shared history of coercive enforcement. Seeing this as paternalism is important because it reminds us that these patterns are not accidental or specific to drugs. Drug policy became a new vehicle for older assumptions about authority, development, and who is deemed capable of self-rule.

**MAT:** That connects to what I found especially compelling in your argument: Mexico's agency, its role as an active partner, and its ability to adapt and negotiate drug

enforcement policies to fit its own security priorities. How does centering Mexico help us or change the way we understand U.S.-Mexico relations?

**AT:** Centering Mexico fundamentally changes the story we tell about U.S.-Mexico relations because it shifts the relationship from one of unilateral imposition to one of negotiated, uneven partnership. When Mexico appears only as a site of U.S. intervention, power looks simple and directional. When Mexico is taken seriously as an actor, we see a far more complex relationship in which cooperation, resistance, and adaptation were constant and strategic. What the book shows is that Mexican officials were not merely responding to U.S. pressure. They actively shaped how drug enforcement operated on the ground. They used U.S. resources to pursue domestic security goals, to strengthen particular institutions, and to manage internal political conflicts. Cooperation with the United States was selective and tactical. Even under conditions of asymmetry, Mexican policymakers retained room to maneuver, and they exercised it.

This perspective helps us move beyond the idea that militarization was simply exported from Washington. Militarized drug policing emerged through interaction. It reflected shared interests at certain moments and deep disagreement at others. Seeing Mexico

as an active partner also helps explain why U.S. initiatives so often produced outcomes Washington did not fully control. Policies were filtered through Mexican institutions with their own histories, priorities, and constraints.

**MAT:** You close your book by questioning the effectiveness of the “war on drugs,” and since your presentation back in January, we’ve continued to see news about it. What kinds of policy approaches do you think have been overlooked or underdeveloped?

**AT:** One of the core arguments of the book is that the problem is not simply that the war on drugs has failed, but that its definition of success has been extremely narrow. Policy has consistently prioritized enforcement metrics such as arrests, seizures, troop deployments, and bilateral cooperation agreements, while sidelining approaches that would reduce harm, stabilize institutions, or address the social conditions that make coercive policing seem necessary in the first place. What has been most underdeveloped are policies that treat drugs as a public health and governance issue rather than primarily a security threat. That includes demand side policies in the United States that go beyond rhetoric to meaningfully invest in treatment, decriminalization, and regulation, but it also includes a serious rethinking of how the U.S. supports state capacity abroad. For decades,

capacity building has meant strengthening coercive institutions while neglecting courts, civilian oversight, labor markets, and local governance. That imbalance has made violence more likely, not less.

The book also highlights how rarely policymakers have grappled with the regional and long term effects of enforcement. Drug policy has been remarkably good at displacing problems spatially and socially, pushing violence into new areas, new populations, and new forms, without questioning whether enforcement itself is driving those outcomes. Approaches that prioritize stability over disruption, and institutional integrity over operational intensity, have largely been dismissed as politically risky or insufficiently tough. Finally, there has been very little willingness to relinquish the idea that control must be exercised through force. Alternatives that emphasize regulation, harm reduction, rural development, or migration policy as part of drug policy are often treated as adjacent issues rather than central ones. What the historical record suggests is that these were not missing because they were unthinkable, but because the war on drugs created a powerful set of institutions and incentives that crowded them out. Rethinking policy requires not only new ideas, but confronting the political and bureaucratic structures that have made coercive enforcement the default response for more than fifty years.

**MAT:** To conclude, are you working on any new projects you can tell us about?

**AT:** My new project examines what it actually took to transfer control of the Panama Canal from the United States to Panama between the signing of the 1977 treaties and the final handover in 1999. Rather than treating the treaties as an endpoint, I focus on the long, contested process of implementation such as how Panamanians learned to administer a global strategic asset under intense scrutiny, how U.S. military and civilian actors resisted or reshaped the transition, and how both sides negotiated sovereignty in practice. By centering Panamanian officials, canal workers, U.S. policymakers, and Canal Zone residents, the project aims to produce a multi-perspectival account of how a nation “undoes” the legacies of foreign intervention while racing against a fixed deadline. As debates over canal ownership have resurfaced in U.S. politics and as Panama navigates new forms of global influence, making the transfer was not just a historical moment, but an unresolved chapter in inter-American relations.

**MAT:** Dr. Teague, thank you so much for your time!

**AT:** Thank you!