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Why Harvard Should Not Welcome Felipe Calderón

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By [Guest Writer](#)

*The following is a guest post by **Marion Lloyd**, a higher-education researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a graduate of Harvard College. She is a former correspondent in Mexico for The Boston Globe, the Houston Chronicle, and The Chronicle of Higher Education.*



Felipe Calderón

After a failed bid to secure a position at the University of Texas, the departing president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, will spend the next year as a visiting fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. [The fellowship](#) will provide a relatively safe haven for Mr. Calderón, who is a target of death threats from Mexican narcotics gangs, and vituperation from angry citizens, as a result of his six-year "war" on the country's drug cartels. [Estimates](#) of the number of people killed in the violence range from 47,000 to nearly 100,000.

Last week's announcement by the Kennedy School came shortly before Mr. Calderón handed over power to Enrique Peña Nieto, and ended months of speculation about the former president's next destination. In August he met with officials at the University of Texas at Austin about a possible teaching position. But those talks apparently fizzled amid [protests](#) from students, faculty, and alumnae, who accused Mr. Calderón of crimes against humanity. In an [online petition](#) that received more than 3,000 signatures, they accused him of seeking to avoid prosecution for dozens of forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

So why the warm welcome at Harvard?

According to [the Kennedy School](#), the former president “is credited with having boosted the nation’s economic development as a pro-business, pro-free-market leader and having made significant reforms to the country’s environmental, immigration, and health-care policies.” David T. Ellwood, dean of the school, lauded Mr. Calderón as “a vivid example of a dynamic and committed public servant, who took on major challenges in Mexico.”

Mr. Calderón, who will become the first Angelopoulos Global Public Leaders Fellow as of January, received a master’s degree in public administration from the Kennedy School in 2000. He holds a law degree and a master’s degree in economics from private universities in Mexico. Mr. Ellwood said the former president’s experience would “inform and inspire Kennedy School students and faculty.”

Such a rosy portrayal is surprising. For one thing, the Kennedy School has made no explicit reference to Calderón’s controversial drug war, which—far more than any of his economic or environmental policies—is likely to remain his primary legacy.

In November 2011, Mexican human-rights groups [filed a petition](#) with the International Criminal Court accusing both Mr. Calderón and cartel leaders of crimes against humanity. The petition, signed by 23,000 people, called for the investigation into the deaths of hundreds of civilians at the hands of the military and of drug traffickers in Mexico. It said the president’s offensive against the cartels had resulted in 470 human-rights violations by the army and police through systematic torturing, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killings.

The same month, Human Rights Watch issued a 212-page report that cited more than 170 cases of torture, 39 disappearances, and 24 extrajudicial killings under Mr. Calderón’s watch. [The report](#), based on research in the five most violent states, concluded that the actual number of violations was much higher. It noted that since 2007, the National Human Rights Commission had received nearly 5,000 allegations of violations by the military, including killings, enforced disappearances, and rape. However, few of those cases have gone to court.

Mr. Calderón has resisted calls by Mexican and international human-rights groups and the country’s Supreme Court to have the allegations against the military brought to civilian courts. He has defended his antinarcotics strategy, arguing that some civilian casualties are inevitable.

The chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court said last week that it would not hear the human-rights case against the former president, because the complainants had not proved the existence of a massive or systematic attack on the civilian population, the *Latin American Herald Tribune* [reported](#).

Mr. Calderón’s strategy against the drug gangs has also been criticized by another former president of Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo, who now heads the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. In [a report](#) released in April and edited by Mr. Zedillo, he questioned the military tactics adopted by the

U.S. government starting in the 1960s and continued in Mr. Calderon's drug war. Mr. Zedillo and other authors argued for a more holistic approach to the problem, including drug-prevention strategies and the upholding of human rights.

Both of the former Mexican presidents have waged wars at home and then sought posts within American academe—in what critics see as a bid to avoid prosecution in Mexico. Mr. Zedillo's high-profile post at Yale may have helped him avoid trial in a civil case brought by Mexican human-rights groups. In September, the U.S. State Department [urged a U.S. federal court](#) to grant Mr. Zedillo immunity in the case, in which he is accused of orchestrating the paramilitary-led killing of 45 Indian villagers, including 18 children. The 1997 massacre in Acteal, in the southern state of Chiapas, was the bloodiest episode in the armed conflict between the Zapatista indigenous rebels and the Mexican government.

In urging immunity for Mr. Zedillo, the U.S. government is aggravating an endemic problem in Mexico: the perception that powerful people are above the law.

The same can be said of Harvard. In awarding Mr. Calderón a high-profile fellowship, the Kennedy School is telling the world that former leaders, however questionable their leadership, are worthy of recognition. It is an unfortunate and dangerous message.

[Photo: Pedro Pardo, AFP, GettyImages]