An Afternoon in Juárez

David Danelo

"You shouldn't stay overnight," said the waitress at El Paso's Camino Real Hotel, referring to her hometown of Ciudad Juárez. She was a petite woman with pale skin and black hair. Her brown eyes projected concern, fear, and surprise when I questioned her about the condition of the local hotels. Starting in November, after two men were murdered at dusk fifteen meters from her front door, she would only commute to work from Juárez in a car and during daylight. Her supervisor had juggled her work schedule so she could stay safe. "Don't you know what is going on?" she asked.

I did know what was going on. It was the reason why I had first come to the border—and the reason why I keep going back. As part of my ongoing research into the border issues, I have visited Juárez seven times over the past two years. Each time I return, I see a populace under greater siege. "The police are nothing," a forlorn cab driver told me in September 2008. "They cannot protect anyone. We can go nowhere else. We live in fear."

I fought in and later chronicled the Iraq war in my first book *Blood Stripes: The Grunt's View of the War in Iraq*. Over the past two years, I have been troubled to discover a mentality south of the border that increasingly resembles one I once witnessed as a U.S. Marine Corps officer in Fallujah. In May 2007, when I visited Nuevo Laredo as part of the research for my second book, I was disturbed to hear a Mexican shopkeeper tell me that "we need American troops here in Mexico." Although many Americans and Mexicans would disagree, the shopkeeper thought U.S. Marines could provide law and order where his own government could not. In 2008, over 5,000 Mexicans were killed in the drug war -- more than all American military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

These dire statistics portend serious consequences. In a December 2008 independent analysis, retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey painted a sobering picture of Mexico's near future. According to McCaffrey's report, drug violence and a stagnating economy may cause Mexico to fragment. Because of the economic and cultural integration between Mexico and the United States, this unfolding event marks the most potent challenge to North American internal security since the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution.[1]

Senior U.S. military officials are taking note. The 2008 Joint Operating Environment assessment, an official Pentagon analysis of the international security situation, warned about the possibility for rapid collapse of two nation-states: Pakistan and Mexico. "The Mexican possibility might seem less likely," said the report, "but the government, its politicians, police and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault by drug cartels." Any sudden Mexican collapse would require a U.S. response "based on the serious implications for homeland security alone."[2]

Although the Pentagon has begun to pay attention, the chronicle of this morbid narrative has morphed into an empty conversation beyond the border regions. With the U.S. economy in free fall, illegal immigration—the only border issue that stirs the American masses—registered an empty splash in this year's elections. Because many illegal aliens are returning south, Mexico did not make the list of questions in either foreign or domestic policy during the presidential debates. Remittances to Mexico from immigrant labor have fallen almost 20 % in 2008. Next to oil, tourism, and remittances, drugs are the leading income stream in the Mexican economy.

While the profit margin of the former three industries has weakened, the street price of every narcotic has increased, in part because of recent

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David Danelo is an author, speaker and consultant.

drug interdiction successes along the border. This toxic economic cocktail also increases the cartel's societal leverage. Subtract the three industries, substitute tribes for cartels, and you have a description of Afghanistan.

Our government's response has been muddled and vague. Both Democrats and Republicans have offered less-than-enthusiastic support for the Merida Initiative, a toothless three-year, $1.4 billion aid package for Mexico that was funded this year. Over 80% of the bill is dedicated to technology procurement, predominately sensors, aircraft, and UAVs. After Congressional skeptics suggested the Mexicans could not be trusted to use the funds responsibly, the bill granted the Calderón government little discretion in dispersing the money. The only certain winners are aviation defense contractors.

In the November 2005 issue of U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, General James Mattis and retired Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman coined a theory of 21st century combat called hybrid warfare. "Irregular methods—terrorism, insurgency, unrestricted warfare, guerrilla war, or coercion by narco-criminals—will challenge U.S. security interests," the pair wrote. Mattis and Hoffman stressed that hybrid wars—a refined type of counterinsurgency—would not be won by focusing on technology or other one-dimensional solutions. Victory, they said, would come from unconventional strategies blending global statecraft with local security. The essential elements of the hybrid war theory have contributed to the U.S. military's tactical success in cities like Mosul, Tal Afar, and Ramadi during the Iraq war.[3]

Over 100 years ago, American and Mexican forces jointly defeated a hybrid threat. From 1871-1910, U.S. soldiers and immigration agents patrolled the border jointly with Mexican *rurales*, former bandits whose loyalty Mexico's Porfirio Diaz had purchased. Diaz and a succession of U.S. presidents were allied against Apache security threats, Comanche rebellions and Asian immigration concerns.[4] I recently asked military historian T. R. Fehrenbach, an expert on Texas and Mexico, if this was the most stable period in the border's history. He said yes.

I have learned many lessons on the border during two years of travels, but two points have stuck with me. First and most important, enduring security solutions can only be achieved through bi-national collaboration and not xenophobic protectionism. Unless the citizens and government of Mexico are equally invested in the final outcome, any attempt to control (or fence) the border will fail. Second, excluding U.S. military forces from ground-level solutions to this international dilemma is terribly flawed. Border security is ultimately a foreign relations problem and cannot be solved exclusively by the Border Patrol, which is modeled largely on domestic law enforcement.

Resistance to a U.S. military ground presence dates to May 20, 1997, when Marine Corps Cpl. Clemente Banuelos shot and killed a teenage boy named Esequiel Hernandez in Redford, Texas. Banuelos had reacted after Hernandez fired a .22 rifle in the direction of his team, which had been concealed from visibility. Subsequent investigations concluded that Hernandez, who had been watering goats, could not have known the Marines were present. The Marines were two hundred yards from Banuelos and cloaked in camouflage during the mission. Hernandez likely thought he was firing at wild animals.

Banuelos was investigated for over a year by the Texas Rangers, the Justice Department, Joint Task Force-6, and the Marine Corps. All four agencies concluded that he had committed no crime. Rules of engagement granted Marines the authority to use deadly force in self defense, and Banuelos—who had received only minimal training in escalation of force procedures, much less the deeper complexities of counterinsurgency theory—had behaved according to standard Marine Corps procedure when under fire.[5] It made the shooting legal, but not inconsequential.

The U.S. government paid the Hernandez family $1.9 million to settle a wrongful death claim for their role in the loss of their son. But that didn't change the reality: Esequiel Hernandez was the first civilian killed by the U.S. military on American soil since four students at Kent State University in 1970. Because of Hernandez's death, the idea of employing the active duty military to support either border security or ground operations in Mexico is often rejected by political advocates on both sides of the aisle. The military doesn't belong on the border, the theory suggests, because of the tragic death of Hernandez—who had sported a U.S. Marine Corps recruiting poster on his bedroom wall.

The common belief that an increase to the U.S. military presence on the border—in full partnership with Mexico—would inevitably result in chaos troubles me. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military has only had tactical success when soldiers and Marines have partnered with local citizens to find effective, humane solutions to violent, inhumane problems. I often fault conservatives for failing to recognize the true nature of the border: it's a zone, and security on both the American and Mexican sides of the line matter. For economic and moral reasons, Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Tijuana are our problem, too. But many liberals refuse to acknowledge that injustice, violence, and anarchy are already the norm along much of *la frontera*. There are places where "militarizing the border" might make things better, not worse.

Sending the U.S. military to stabilize either side of the border poses challenges. Young Americans brimming with duty, honor, and Red Bull are not always the ideal resolution to protracted peacekeeping enigmas. As in Iraq, grunts who would carry out this theoretical mission would encounter one Catch-22 after another. They would patrol with Mexican soldiers they might not trust, deal with corrupt politicians whom they would be powerless to remove from office, adapt to streetwalkers who smile one day and betray them the next, and do it all in the relentless, perfectionist glare of a media spotlight.

Nevertheless, when American and Mexican citizens in specific locales clamor repeatedly for reinforcements to police and civilian law enforcement, the U.S. Army and/or Marine Corps should rightfully be considered a viable alternative. If mayors are regularly bribed, and police chiefs are routinely killed on either side of the border, then the American and Mexican governments have a moral obligation to respond to their people. When 86% of Mexicans say they need soldiers walking the streets to protect them from organized crime—as they did in a 2004 poll—then military forces are, by default, the last, best hope for success.

Back in El Paso, after eating at the Camino Real, I walked around Juárez for the afternoon and was surprised to find the *mercado* filled with shoppers. Ordinarily this was *siesta* time, but not anymore; wives and families completed purchases during the day so they could remain home after dark. Their residences had become barricades. "Everyone is paying money to *El Chapo*," said a bartender, referring to the Sinaloa Cartel. Bilingual stores paid $1500 per month in protection; Mexican-only businesses forked over the same in pesos. Uniformed *policia* had established a perimeter around the shopping district. Rumor was they worked for *El Chapo*.

I did not stay the night.

[1] McCaffrey, Gen. Barry R., *After-Action Report: Visit Mexico 5-7 December 2008*. Archived at www.mccaffreyassociates.com

[2] Joint Forces Command, *Joint Operating Environment 2008*. Archived at www.jfcom.mil

[3] Mattis, Gen. James N. and Hoffman, Lt. Col Frank G. "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, November 2005, pp.30-32.

[4] Fehrenbach, T. R., *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, pp. 458-59.

[5] Coyne, Maj. Gen John T. "Investigation Into the

(JTF-6) Shooting Incident That Occurred on 20 May 1997 Near the Border Between the U.S. and Mexico." U.S. Marine Corps, Camp Pendleton, California, April 7, 1998.