

The Border War

By David J. Danelo

Border security is a foreign relations problem that cannot be solved by an agency modeled on domestic law enforcement. Our southern border needs the presence of the U.S. military. The author of a new book looking at the U.S.-Mexican border tells us why.

The U.S.-Mexico border is the most unstable region in North America. During the first eight months of 2008, more than 2,500 drug-related killings have occurred in Mexico. Half of the murders have happened in border cities; cartels are fighting for authority over smuggling routes from Tijuana to Matamoros. Systematic campaigns of bribery, intimidation, and assassination have prevented law enforcement officers from curbing the violence. On both sides of the line, news seems to worsen daily.

Since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, almost 5,000 Mexicans have died, more than the number of American troops killed in seven years of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. More than half of the casualties have been police officers. Through-

U.S. BORDER PATROL (GERALD L. NINO)

CONTINENTAL DIVIDE The U.S. (left)-Mexican border is filled with contrasts, no more so than here. The nearly 2,000-mile-long political division is also rife with problems, many of which cannot be solved by a domestically based law enforcement agency.



out Mexico, 40,000 troops struggle valiantly—but often unsuccessfully—to impose order. “It is a war,” President Calderón declared in May 2008 to reporters, while also appealing for U.S. assistance.

Two months earlier, in March 2008, the rising body count in Ciudad Juárez prompted Calderón to deploy 2,500 Mexican soldiers to the state of Chihuahua. After he announced the deployment, I went to Juárez to see what martial law looked like there. Soldiers patrolled in teams of four with weapons at the ready, wearing masks to conceal their identities from enemy surveillance. Forty checkpoints had been placed around the city. Military forces took over the police’s daily duties, screening traffic and maintaining security. The police split their loyalties between government forces and insurgents simply to survive. Gunfire rang out nightly.

Because the casualty level in Mexico is much lower than that of, say, Iraq, military analysts hesitate to call this a war. After all, border combatants do not use suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices. But both wars involve non-state campaigns that have weakened legitimate authority. In Iraq, factions of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds jockey to impose their worldview; in Mexico, cartels fight for market control to feed America’s insatiable demand for cocaine, heroin, and cheap labor. Through prison recruits and street gangs, narcoterrorists also threaten to destabilize significant portions of the American southwest. Although the outcome remains uncertain, geography dictates that Mexico’s security situation will be an issue of permanent strategic significance to the United States.

Murky U.S. Action

The Pentagon’s position on the war in Mexico has not been clearly defined. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, drug interdiction capabilities south of the border from 2003 to 2007

were reduced by 62 percent as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And to the north, Operation Jump Start, a federally funded surge of 6,000 National Guard troops that was less than popular with Defense Department brass, ended on 15 July. There are no plans for renewal.

Congress has been equally 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 passed in 2008. Over 80 percent of the bill is dedicated to technology procurement—mostly

sensors, aircraft, and UAVs. After congressional skeptics suggested the Mexicans could not be trusted to use the funds responsibly, U.S. lawmakers granted the Calderón government little discretion in dispensing the money. The only certain winners are aviation defense contractors.

In editorials and opinion forums, border residents—particularly west of El Paso, where the international anarchy is at its worst—cheered Operation Jump Start and lamented its July 2008 end. Although the troops only provided logistics support and observation assistance for border agencies, some locals believed their presence sent a signal to smugglers. From the perspective of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, however, the troop deployment had little to do with psychological operations. It was a stop-gap measure designed to free agents for fieldwork while the Border Patrol increased their ranks from 12,000 to 20,000. As the Border Patrol’s rolls expanded, Homeland Security deemed additional troops unnecessary.

During the 1990s, the Border Patrol’s interdiction rate had fallen to around 25 percent. Officials say that it now reaches upward of 90 percent in a few highly guarded



REUTERS (TOMAS BRANCO)

MEXICAN MARTIAL LAW In March 2008 President Felipe Calderón deployed Mexican soldiers to Ciudad Juárez in the wake of numerous murders and acts of violence.

areas. However, for many rural locales, almost half of illegal entrants are not caught by U.S. agents, despite the significant employment of additional personnel, sensors, and other resources.

Despite their tactical and technological capabilities, I do not believe that 20,000 agents will be any more effective at securing the border than 10,000 have been. This is not intended to take anything away from the men and women who perform brave, humane, and unheralded feats on America’s southwestern frontier. But doubling the size

of the Border Patrol without a serious reexamination of basic strategic assumptions obscures fundamental issues and misses the forest for the trees.

In *Proceedings*' November 2005 issue, Marine Corps General James N. Mattis and retired Marine 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 such as Mosul, Tal Afar, and Ramadi during the Iraq War.

Department of Defense planners define combat operations along a phased spectrum from zero to five. During Phase 0, security forces are mobilized to prevent a burgeoning conflict from emerging; in Phase 1, a war is underway and military forces are preparing to shape events in progress to regain initiative. Right now, a hybrid war—think Phase 0.5—is in progress throughout Mexico and along our common border in parts of the southwestern United States. Although cartels do not seek to overthrow the existing political structure, the increasing levels of violence indicate that the non-state opponents—who are better networked, equipped, and financed than the combination of the Mexican Army and U.S. Border Patrol—are winning the fight.

Break from History

The U.S. government defines border security as the province of law enforcement, but this has not been the historical norm. From 1871 to 1910, Texas Rangers and U.S. customs inspectors patrolled the border jointly with Mexican *rurales*. Mexico's Porfirio Díaz had allied with a succession of U.S. presidents against Apache security threats and Asian immigration concerns.¹ Although many *rurales* were former bandits themselves, the Mexican government paid them well, which encouraged their cooperation with Americans. The tactic bore similarities to the U.S. Marines approach to Anbar Province in 2006, co-opting former Sunni insurgents into Awakening Councils.

Relations soured during the pre-World War I Mexican Revolution, and the border alliance ended. The low-water mark came in 1916, when Pancho Villa's raid into Columbus, New Mexico, led to a U.S. Army incursion. During Prohibition, shootouts between Mexican rumrunners and U.S. Soldiers became common events. This inspired the 1924 creation of the U.S. Border Patrol as both an immigration enforcement agency and a paramilitary support force. Army bases were shuttered after the ban on alcohol was removed, and then reopened for mobilization during World War II. Still, throughout the 1930s and early '40s, the Border Patrol called on the Army during international firefights.

ON FENCE DUTY The U.S. Border Patrol, some of whom are seen patrolling the fence line, is based on domestic law enforcement principles, yet has to deal with complex foreign relations issues.

By the end of 1945, when the Pentagon became absorbed with defending against the Soviet Union, guarding the borders had evolved into a matter that was supposedly left to civilians. This remained the status quo until 13 November 1989. Two days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, President George H. W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Colin Powell, announced the establishment of Joint Task Force (JTF)-6. "I believe that our military forces have the capability to make a substantial contribution towards drug interdiction," then-Secretary Cheney said. "I am instructing them to carry out that responsibility."

The Pentagon ordered JTF-6 to establish a headquarters in El Paso. Mission: support local, state, and federal law enforcement. Official area of operations: California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Press coverage: none. Compared with the end of the Cold War, a few soldiers on the border didn't seem particularly important. From September 1990 to May 1997, JTF-6 completed more than 3,450 missions there. Although they were officially called "counterdrug" missions, these military activities effectively became border security operations. Today, JTF-6 is known as JTF-North.²

Tragedy-Forced Change

On 20 May 1997, the U.S. military's ground presence on the border came to an abrupt end. Corporal Clemente Bañuelos, an artillery forward observer, shot and killed a teenage boy named Esequiel Hernández in Redford, Texas. Bañuelos had reacted after Hernández fired a .22-caliber rifle in the direction of his team. Subsequent investigations concluded that Hernández, who had been watering goats, could not have known the Marines were present. The Marines were 200 yards from Bañuelos and cloaked in camouflage during the mission. Hernández likely thought he was firing at wild animals.

The Texas Rangers, the Justice Department, JTF-6, and the Marine Corps investigated Bañuelos for more than a year. 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 Bañuelos—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.³





U.S. BORDER PATROL (JAMES TOURTELLOTT)

The U.S. government paid the Hernández family \$1.9 million to settle a wrongful death claim for the role of Corporal Bañuelos in the loss of their son. But that didn't change the reality: Esequiel Hernández was the first civilian killed by the U.S. military on American soil since four students at Kent State University in 1970. Because of Hernández's death, the idea of employing active duty U.S. forces to support either U.S.-Mexico border security or ground operations in Mexico has become an official taboo.

Three Choices

As the 21st century unfolds, U.S. government leaders can choose from three strategic approaches to confront this hybrid war. One is to maintain the current strategy: add increasing levels of personnel, detection technology, and new infrastructure to the border, and treat Mexico's difficulties as an internal

problem. Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe this will work any better in the future than it has in the past. Agents, cameras, sensors, concrete barriers, and fences may offer the expedient illusion of progress to a restless electorate, but the existing model is not likely to create enduring stability.

The second option is to treat Mexico as an enemy state. U.S. authorities could respond by fully militarizing the border. This would mean pulling out of NAFTA, digging claymores outside of El Paso, mining the Rio Grande, and establishing a final protective fire in Arizona's Sonoran Desert with .50-caliber machine guns. This would brutally, but effectively, seal the border. Rabid anti-immigration activists in the blogosphere might cheer this course of action, but I have yet to meet a single member of the U.S. national security establishment who advocates this path.

The final choice—perhaps the most difficult to conceptualize on many levels—is to make Mexico a full partner in U.S. border security while simultaneously expanding the investment of U.S. resources in Mexico's hybrid war. This would require legislative action for tactical, operational, and strategic coordination. In this scenario, Mexican military units, police officers, and security forces would be treated as adjacent organizations rather than opponents or independent actors.

At first blush, the apparent obstacles to this final option seem insurmountable. Mutual distrust between Americans and Mexicans has almost been institutionalized as part of North American societal DNA. Mexico's security forces are not without cause seen as corrupt and untrustworthy. Changes to American immigration and narcotics laws, which contribute to Mexico's destabilization, have become politically impossible. The U.S. Navy's formal request for basing rights in Mexico has been officially rebuffed for seven decades. And the U.S. Coast Guard has less bilateral authority for law enforcement operations with the Mexican government than with any other nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Small Opening

Were it not for the Calderón administration, the U.S. government would have little reason to believe that Mexico wants a long-term investment with their northern neighbors. But Calderón has backed his talk with action, both in his response to the cartels and in his attitude toward U.S. assistance. In 2007, the Mexican government accepted full partnership in NORTHCOM after spurning American offers since the command's inception in 2002. When I asked JTF-North officials about Mexican partnerships, they described a "glasnost"—a transparency and openness—that has increased productive security cooperation to the highest levels they have seen in their careers.

But glasnost is rarely a permanent condition. The Mexican constitution restricts all presidents to a single term, and Calderón will be out of office in 2012. If Calderón fails to show progress by reducing crime, the Mexican electorate may choose a successor less favorably disposed to American interests. Unless working partnerships are codi-

fied into a more enduring series of agreements, the gains made under Calderón will be lost. There is a limited window of opportunity.

Despite the myriad security challenges, the United States is living in a time of feast with respect to opportunities with the Mexican military. The U.S. government should consider enacting legislation—such as negotiating hot pursuit clauses and defining a zone of cooperation—that could endure a future political famine. Within the next four years, every bilateral commitment, military-based partnership or offer that the Mexican government has rejected since the end of World War II should be revisited. Not all of these will be workable, but the entire spectrum should be re-evaluated.

The U.S. military has solid experience in liaison relationships on the tactical and operational levels with foreign militaries of every skill level. The Pentagon—not Homeland Security—is positioned to put this experience to use as partnerships evolve in Mexico. Negotiating the use of U.S. troops for both border security and cooperation with Mexico—not only as counterinsurgency advisers (as in Colombia), but also as peers—sends a signal of long-term commitment that law enforcement simply does not.

During my travels on the border, I was surprised to discover Mexican civilians who were in favor of U.S. military help. “Why are the Americans in Iraq? They should be here instead,” a Nuevo Laredo shopkeeper commented in May 2007, lamenting the violence that has plagued his city for three years. “If this menace remains, there will be nothing left.” Local Mexican officials also voiced approval. “As long as it goes through the proper channels,” said Héctor Cantú, mayor of Marín, a city south of Nuevo Laredo, “[American military] aid is welcome.”

What the Military Can Offer

As a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon has acquired a cadre of the finest counterinsurgency practitioners on the planet, an adaptive force trained to find effective, humane solutions to violent, inhumane problems. In Mexico City’s fight, President Calderón could use American warrior-scholars who have cut their teeth in complex environments. The U.S. Border Patrol could use assistance patrolling remote swaths of federal land like the Tohono O’odham Nation and the Coronado and Organ Pipe National Forest. In either case, our military focus should not simply guarding the line, but also in taking concrete, productive steps to quell the furor to the south. Lessons learned



TALK AND ACTION President Calderón has backed up his statements by taking on the domestic drug cartels and supporting and encouraging U.S. assistance.

in Anbar also have application in Arizona.

Truthfully, the idea of sending the U.S. military to stabilize either side of the border bothers me. 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.

But if American or Mexican citizens in specific locales along the border clamor repeatedly for reinforcements to police and civil-

ian law enforcement, then the U.S. Army and Marine Corps should rightfully be considered as viable alternatives. When security decays to its nadir—as when 86 percent of Mexicans polled in 2004 said they needed soldiers walking the streets to protect them from organized crime—governments have a moral obligation to respond to the basic needs of their citizens. In dire circumstances, military forces are, by default, the last best hope for success.

In May 2008, two months after I visited Juárez, Mexico’s national chief of police was assassinated. Three months later, the war’s annual death toll passed 2,500. As the growing anarchy terrorized residents, the territorial graffiti celebrating gangs and protesters plastered along the border fences near Juárez had never felt so haunting. And both Washington and Mexico City had never seemed so remote. ❄

1. T. R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973 and 1995), pp. 458-59.

2. Since 1997 JTF North has continued to conduct missions along the border, although the size and scope have publicly been restricted. For a decade, most JTF North missions involved the use of aircraft for reconnaissance and surveillance and combat engineers (particularly Reserve units) to build fences and vehicle barriers. In 2007, after President Calderón took office, the cooperation between Mexican and U.S. military units increased significantly.

3. MG John T. Coyne, “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, 7 April 1998.

Mr. Danelo, a 1998 U.S. Naval Academy graduate, former Marine Corps officer, and Iraq War veteran, is the author of *The Border: Exploring the U.S.-Mexican Divide* (Stackpole, 2008). His first book, *Blood Stripes: The Grunt’s View of the War in Iraq* (Stackpole, 2006), won several awards for military writing and is on a mandatory reading list for U.S. Marines deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq.