

**KEEPING THE PEACE-WHILE THE NEIGHBORS FIGHT :
THE EFFECT OF A CIVIL WAR IN MEXICO ON SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA LAW ENFORCEMENT**

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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Images of war, destruction and death are on our television screens nightly. What if those images were coming from just across our border instead of thousands of miles across the sea? Picture millions of American families sitting around their televisions, watching the evening news. Over and over again images are shown of roadside bombs blowing up Mexican Army transport vehicles just outside Tijuana, 18 miles from San Diego, America's eighth largest city. Imagine the impact of thousands of Mexican refugees flooding across the U.S. border seeking sanctuary from the violence with the Red Cross setting up camps at the Coliseum, Rose Bowl and Qualcomm Stadium. No longer will Americans be watching events unfold in Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Kabul instead they will be living with the fallout of war in San Diego, Chula Vista and Oceanside.

How would a war next door play out on the streets of Southern California? Because of its proximity and large Mexican-American population, the ripples of this conflict are sure to be felt in neighborhoods throughout the region. The effects could range from small demonstrations to a dramatic war spill over where violence is directed at U.S. troops and citizens. As this unfolds, it is likely to cause panic in our communities. People will be looking to various federal, state and local government agencies to bring order and safety to the streets. In the face of this unprecedented crisis, how would Southern California's various law enforcement agencies respond?

Noise coming from the Neighbors

The Encyclopedia Britannica (2008) notes Mexico has endured its share of political violence. Through its history, there has been conflict between progressive populist groups and pro-business establishment factions. From Hidalgo's Revolution of 1810 to the more recent violence associated with moves to privatize their oil industry, there has always been a segment of the population that is looking to make dramatic changes in the Mexican society; and not always with a ballot. The 1994 Chiapas Uprising, the turmoil of their most recent elections and influence from outside leaders such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez create a volatile mix.

Mexico also has a huge gap between the haves and have-nots. Forbes (2008) says the second richest man in the world, Carlos Slim Helu, is Mexican. At the same, Alvarez (2007) cites information from the Mexican Stock Exchange, at the close of 2006, just 173,000 investors (0.16 percent of Mexico's total population) had accumulated capital on the stock market equivalent to 37.7 percent of GDP. According to the World Bank, 50 percent of Mexico's 105 million inhabitants live in poverty on wages of below \$4 a day. Of these, 15 percent live in extreme poverty on incomes of less \$1 a day. These conditions are ideal for the rise of radicalism.

Populist or socialist movements are on the rise throughout Central and South America. In Mexico, groups like Zapista National Liberation Army (EZLN), Popular Peoples Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO), Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent Town (ERPI), and Revolutionary Army of the People (EPR) have protested against the current Mexican government. These armed groups feel the country has abandon the principles of the Mexican Revolution. Many fear the conservative government of President Felipe Calderon will privatize the country's vast government owned oil industry.

Mexico's ranking as the world's sixth largest oil producer and its burgeoning consumer market have given rise to trade talks with China, Iran and Venezuela. There is increasing world-wide interest in Mexican affairs. History has shown the combination of internal dissent and external interference has routinely resulted in violent conflict.

In a study published in *The Futurist*, Mazarr (1999) outlines five potential future scenarios for Mexico. He named one of the scenarios "Ungovernability." In this scenario, Mexican society degenerates into violent chaos. He notes this would require some type of immense trigger, such as an economic depression or a massive wave of social violence. He imagines a scenario where central government control erodes and governing fragments into regional pieces run by a complicated patchwork of government, business, military, drug lords, and other actors. He finally notes that if the U.S. were to revoke the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) it could destabilize Mexican society and lead to social chaos or even civil war. It is noteworthy that, during the current United States Presidential election, both Democratic candidates have been highly critical of NAFTA. If it were to be repealed, the destabilization of Mexican society Mazarr speaks of could follow. The subsequent trade and immigration implications would surely have an impact on Southern California.

The Impact on Southern California

Mirroring the refugee migration in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, those fleeing violence in Mexico could be expected to find shelter with family members living in the United States. There are also bound to be thousands that will be seeking temporary shelter and do not have family to turn to. The Red Cross and The Federal Emergency Management Agency would need to mobilize, and could quickly become overwhelmed. Tent cities could spring up all over in large open areas, such as; fairgrounds, parks and sports venues. In areas where temporary housing was

not made available there could be hundreds of refugees sleeping in the streets. Imagine, tens of thousands of refugees looking for work, food and shelter. Public clinics would quickly be overrun, sick children may go untreated and the number of unemployed laborers would swell. Men would be standing on street corners by the hundreds. At day labor sites and in the fields, fighting could break out among the masses as they vie for the few odd jobs that may be available.

Enter the first of many challenges for Southern California's law enforcement agencies. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there were reports of crimes perpetrated by and against refugees and among the displaced people. This would likely be magnified in this scenario. The displacement centers would need 24 hour security and this would initially be a responsibility of local law enforcement. Let's take the Rose Bowl in Pasadena for example. If a tent city were established in and around the Rose Bowl, thousands of refugees would flood the surrounding parking lots and perhaps even the adjacent Brookside Golf Course. This would quickly overwhelm Pasadena's medium sized police department. To effectively handle this new population, they would have to ask for assistance from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department or any number of neighboring agencies. This could necessitate the activation of the region's mutual aid system.

The Los Angeles County Mutual Aid System is usually effective when dealing with significant events located in a set geographic area in the county. Their planning and response to the 2000 Democratic National Convention at the Staples Center in Downtown Los Angeles was well organized, In that instance, the County, City and various neighboring jurisdiction worked to keep violence and disturbances to a minimum.

Conversely, the events associated with a Mexican Civil War will be wide-spread and be felt by virtually every community in metropolitan Southern California simultaneously. A refugee camp at the Rose Bowl will overtax and overwhelm the mutual aid system. The Pasadena Police Department may find themselves in a difficult policing situation, one which will surely test every facet of their planning, organization and staffing skills. This scenario is likely to unfold in both urban and rural areas throughout Southern California. Concentrations of refugees in areas like migrant camps or urban parks may be brought to the boiling point, resulting in violence or civil unrest. One area in urban Los Angeles is but one of many potential flashpoint locales.

Civil Unrest in Southern California

Los Angeles' Mac Arthur Park is frequently used as a launching point for political marches and demonstrations related to immigrant rights and at times has been the scene of pro-socialist may day rallies. Its past as a progressive protest site, coupled with its proximity to the Mexican Consulate (located across the street); make it a likely location for a flashpoint.

While fighting raged in Mexico, there would be elements in the United States that would be emotionally engaged with loyalties on one side or the other. Radical elements opposed to the government could target the consulate and use the park as a staging area. Emotions are sure to be running high. Ex-patriots captivated by the images of violence in their former home may feel a draw to be part of the war. If opposing factions were to simultaneously come to the Park and Consulate, the result could be a violent confrontation, with the Los Angeles Police Department stuck in the middle. If not contained immediately, the mob mentality of civil unrest could quickly spread throughout the region.

Traditionally when rioting breaks out in urban areas, large agencies like the Los Angeles Police Department rely on the State National Guard to compliment their efforts to regain control.

With a “shooting war” occurring near our border, it is likely the President would nationalize the Guard and use them for border defense. With regionalized turmoil and a lack of outside resources, even a large department like L.A.P.D. would have difficulty bringing peace to its nearly 500 square mile territory and more than a million people of Mexican Descent. Los Angeles would discover that providing even the most basic police services in this circumstance would test every aspect of their preparation, operational planning and deployment skills. Other agencies throughout the Border States would experience similar duress in their efforts to protect the populace.

War Spillover

As the violence and unrest seeps across the border, the American people will start to become uneasy. The United States Border Patrol and The United States Customs Agency would have difficulty controlling access to this country. Government leaders in Sacramento and Washington are bound to react with a series of press conferences and initiatives to enhance homeland security measures. One possible response would be to militarize the border and effectively shut it down. This is likely to be controversial and could result in backlash against the government and even perhaps the soldiers, themselves. And if there were to be any incursions across the border by U.S. troops, it would be a violation of treaties between the two countries dating back to 1848.

The tension created by the war and subsequent turbulence will likely manifest itself through violent acts of frustration by scared or motivated people on both sides of the border. As we have seen in Iraq, it is likely the military could become the target of this bane. The type of insurgents having the audacity to attack armed U.S. military personnel would be extremely dangerous. It is possible the insurgents may use improvised explosive devices and/or guerrilla

tactics. Initially, the military will have strict rules of engagement. Pfaff (2000) noted the rules of engagement for the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia included the provision, “to ‘use only the minimum force necessary to defend yourself.’” In the case of a Mexican Civil War, if the border protection units encounter attacks and suffer casualties, the rules may quickly change.

A tragic encounter at the border could instantly take some of the rebellious focus away from the Mexican situation and instead turn it toward U.S. forces. Imagine if an American soldier were to shoot a Mexican family approaching a checkpoint in a car traveling at a high rate of speed. The condemnation and second guessing would be immense. The shooting and outrage could have a snowball effect, and lead to greater dissent and violence. If the rebellious parties were to start to target sites and installations on this side of the border, Southern California law enforcement would have their hands full.

As an example, consider in September 2007, The Associated Press reported that a shadowy leftist guerilla group (People’s Revolutionary Army-EPR) took responsibility for a string of explosions that ripped apart at least six oil and gas pipelines. There have also been reports of bombings of election offices and police stations in Mexico. If the war spills over into the United States, one can picture guerrillas, sympathetic to the rebellious factions in Mexico, striking against infrastructure and key installations in Southern California. There could be Roadside bombings along interstate 5, just outside Camp Pendleton, acts of vandalism intended to disrupt oil production and even attacks on our police stations.

Police Departments across the region may need to reassess their priorities and quite possibly transform their agencies from community service oriented to regional force protection oriented. Non-essential, Community-based policing and service oriented public relations units may not be as useful if the violence rises to an uncontrollable level. Law enforcement leaders

may want to assert a new mission and assign personnel to observe and report on possible terrorist activity, contain rioting, and defuse explosives. These activities may prove more essential in these trying times.

The “militarization” of local police departments is sure to be criticized by civil liberty groups. If law enforcement leaders choose to ratchet up their force protection elements, they will need to ensure that adequate oversight, documentation and procedures are in place. Direct oversight will help ensure that justifiable force is used and documented appropriately. This was a key recommendation in the Steven Enquiry (2003). Sir John Stevens, Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police Force reviewed the events surrounding the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland and found that some in the Royal Ulster Constabulary were complacent in the murders of dissenters during that violent era. Direct administrative supervision and clear operational directives will be critical to ensure there is an effective yet measured law enforcement response.

Law Enforcement Response

Needless to say, these events are surely to be overwhelming for all segments of the government as well as the general public. In the past, the initial response of local police departments has had a dramatic effect on how deadly and long lasting civil unrest can be. Methvin (1991) said it best, when he said “riots begin when some set of social forces temporarily overwhelms or paralyzes the police, who stand by, their highly visible inaction signaling to the small percentage of teenaged embryonic psychopaths and hardened young adults that a moral holiday is under way.” Unlike past riots, the events occurring far from our cities in Mexico will have a simmering effect. What happens on our streets may take a while to ferment, but quick decisive action will be needed. If a war is disruptive and lengthy, it is likely to enflame the rebellious insurgent elements on both sides of the border.

One way to survive this bedlam is for police leaders to quickly identify their resources. They will also need to ensure they have the ability to quickly mobilize these resources. This will be especially critical if mutual aid requests are made of them. Rapid decision making and field deployment can mean the difference between life and death for the people living in their communities. Foresight and anticipatory planning is another.

In private industry, progressive companies have dedicated Strategic Planning or Research and Development (R&D) Teams assigned to keep up with current trends. More importantly, they also work to ensure decision makers have the ability to quickly put into place mechanisms to achieve true transformational change. Take Nokia, for instance. The Finnish Company started as a paper mill. Their commitment to a two-fold research model transformed the company to one of today's largest mobile phone providers. The two-fold process includes one section that supports existing business as the other explores areas outside of their current business model. This model could be adopted in the public sector.

One public sector example of an innovative approach to planning is the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Mitigation Program. In 2000, Congress enacted the Disaster Mitigation Act. This program, administered by FEMA, instituted local Mitigation Planning Teams. According to their webpage, they are designed to provide an orderly and continuing means of assistance by the Federal Government to State and local governments in carrying out their responsibilities to alleviate the suffering and damage which result from disasters. This program provides local government with a step-by-step guide to effective risk assessment. It guides local authorities through hazard identification, how to profile hazardous events, inventorying assets and estimating losses. Although the focus of their guidance is on natural disasters, local police can use the framework to assess a variety of challenges. The

guideposts could be the structure for transforming an agency and giving it the tools to plan for catastrophic events, including war.

One public sector resource that could be accessed by a Mitigation Planning Team is the Los Angeles Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC). Evers (2006) explains that this center joins federal, state and local law enforcement in one facility as part of a post-9/11 effort to improve law enforcement collaboration. Analysts and investigators at the center handle intelligence from the various agencies on potential threats to national security, in particular terrorism, and correlate the data. As one way of mitigating the Mexican civil war's effects, police departments should work closely with JRIC. This would help ensure they have the most current information available at a moment's notice by the commanders who will be responsible for reacting to the crises.

Local law enforcement agencies would benefit from having a department-based Mitigation Planning Team. They could be involved in gathering intelligence, interdepartmental communications, resource inventory, personnel management, and force deployment. A team formed to help manage such a wide-scale incident would continually study events unfolding and monitor resources available. They would work closely with the region's JRIC, and be in a position to help their department transform in the face of the war's challenges.

Transforming to Meet the Challenges of War

As people sit in their living rooms today, and watch the scenes from Iraq of improvised explosive devices going off on roadsides, in marketplaces and at police stations, they can take solace in the fact that these tragic events are thousands of miles away. A civil war in Mexico could bring this type of violence a whole lot closer to home.

In the case of war adjacent to our southern border, insurgent attacks on United States military personnel stationed at the border would endanger civilian and military lives and disrupt a key trade corridor. If these same radical elements were to target American civilians or police, the mission of local law enforcement would change dramatically. It is important that police departments adequately plan for these future catastrophic events, even the unthinkable ones. By creating Mitigation Planning Teams and actively participating with their regions Joint Regional Intelligence Center, agencies will have a dedicated unit to help them prepare, transform their departments and ready them for challenges ahead. The alternative could be an ineffective public safety net, swallowed up by the war and its spillover.

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