

**Violence towards police and politicians in Mexico;  
Implications for California Policing?**

**by**

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The Command College Futures Professional Article is a 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 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 professional article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## **Violence towards police and politicians in Mexico; Implications for California Policing?**

Police officers and politicians in Mexico are being targeted and killed by drug cartels. Because of their chosen profession, their family members are also kidnapped, tortured and murdered. Bodies are dangled headless from highway overpasses, and decapitated heads are being placed in public places. Videos of tortured persons are being streamed on Internet sites and suspects brag of more to come. In the past five years, more than 47,000 people have been murdered in Mexico. These facts are tragic in their own right; sadly, there are strong signals that indicate the violence is coming to America.

According to House Representative Michael McCaul, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management, Mexican cartel members have been overheard plotting to kill Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and Texas Rangers guarding the border by using AK-47s by shooting at them from across the border (Kimery). In Zapata County, Texas, deputy sheriffs discovered .50 caliber cartridges, camouflage netting and night vision equipment in a vehicle they had stopped that was being driven by individuals working for the Los Zetas Cartel (Kimery). Is California law enforcement prepared to respond to this phenomenon when it arrives, or is there evidence that suggests it is already here?

Violence against law enforcement officials in Mexico has always been present, but never before has it been so prevalent or brutal. The escalation of violence began when Mexico's President, Felipe Calderon took office in 2006.

President Calderon pledged he was going to go after the drug cartels, but instead of trying to hide from justice, the cartels pledged to fight back (Carter). The cartels have historically committed violence against rival cartels that threaten to take away profits from Mexico's illegal drug business. Now, they are working together to fight against their government to ensure drug trafficking continues to be a way of life. According to former Los Zetas Cartel overlord, Jaime Gonzalez Duran, he instructed his cells to engage law enforcement with a full tactical response should the police law attempt to intervene in their operations (Kimery). The cartels have amassed their own army; their numbers rival the Mexican army. According to the United States Defense Department, Mexico's two most deadly drug cartels together have fielded more than 100,000 foot soldiers (Carter).

Organized crime in Mexico has, for years, laundered large sums of money into the United States; however, money laundering has only been a fiscal offense in Mexico's Federal Fiscal Code since 1989 (Brien). Now, though, that money is no longer used just to further narcotic enterprises; it is also being used to influence election campaigns and supply the cartel's army with weapons. Exacerbating this is the willingness of government officials to assist with the flow of Cartel Money. In 2009, thirty high level officials in Mexico were accused of protecting cartels due to the money they received from them (Schroeder). Mexico officials believe that 60,000 to 70,000 assault weapons have been smuggled into Mexico from the United States (Simpson).

With the amount of narcotics being smuggled to the United States from Mexico, and the amount of cash and assault weapons being smuggled back into

Mexico from the United States, it is apparent the current method of border security is not effective to prevent the cartels from operating in the United States. The DEA estimates that 4,200 pounds of marijuana will enter the United States through Arizona this year alone. The DEA estimates that the drug cartels generate about \$10 billion annually from the sale of drugs passing through Arizona (Potter). According the Alliance to Combat Transnational Threats, a joint United States and Mexico task force, since September 2009, their program has arrested 270,000 illegal border crossers, seized 1.6 million pounds of marijuana, and recovered \$13 million in cash in the Tucson area alone (Gannett). While the number is staggering and can be credited to effective and coordinated law enforcement efforts, U.S. officials believe the seizures only represent about 20% of the total marijuana being smuggled into the United States through Arizona (Potter).

There is strong evidence to indicate the tactics of the cartels are very effective, and also that they will not shy away from deploying the same violence against Americans. According to an unclassified Homeland Security and FBI Joint Intelligence Bulletin dated February 19, 2011, two ICE agents were ambushed in Mexico after they were surveilled and rammed by two large trucks containing cartel members. On April 8, 2011, a special agent of the Arizona Attorney General's Office working undercover for a multi-agency drug task force became a victim on U.S. soil of a similar "narco-blockade". Disturbingly, the agent was shot in the shoulder and neck while following two vehicles whose drivers performed maneuvers similar to those routinely performed by cartel

ambushes in Mexico (Kimery). In December of 2010, a reputed gang member was arrested in Arizona after 30 hand grenades were discovered hidden under the spare tire of the vehicle he was driving. In May of 2011, Mexican security forces seized an arsenal from a home in Ciudad Juarez that included a weapon capable of downing aircraft (Kimery).

To date, officials of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) dismiss the notion that there is spill over violence from Mexico, or that Mexican cartels would declare war on United States law enforcement and politicians for fear of the retribution that would occur. Border patrol agents and other DHS officials have spoken anonymously, though, and absolutely disagree with their bosses (Kimery). Some privately suggest similar statements were made about al-Qaeda's fear of attacking the United States prior to the attacks on 9-11-01.

Additional evidence suggests that many of those committing violence in Mexico are connected to the United States, specifically, to the State of California. This is evident by a number of similar events:

- On July 23, 2011, a San Diego teenager confessed to killing four people whose beheaded bodies were found suspended from a bridge in Mexico. The teenager also confessed he was working for the South Pacific drug cartel (Alonso).
- In September of 2010, David Hartley was murdered by Mexican pirates while he was riding a jet ski on Falcon Lake. Parts of Falcon Lake are in Mexico and the Los Zetas drug cartel, which is attempting to control the lake, is suspected of the murder (Olson). The Mexican Detective assigned

to investigate the murder was ambushed and murdered days after stating he had evidence to suggest a Mexican cartel was responsible for the murder.

- In February of 2011, a United States Immigration Agent assigned in Mexico was murdered and his partner shot while they stopped at a roadblock. The gun used to kill the agent had been purchased in Dallas, Texas and smuggled into Mexico.

Each of these incidents adds credibility to the perspective of federal agents who fear an acceleration of Cartel crimes in the USA. Sadly, America's hunger for narcotics keeps the cartels in business, and is helping fund their fight against the government of Mexico. Even though police agencies in California have sophisticated means by which to combat drug crime, the direct threat to their safety posed by cartel expansion adds an entirely new element to their efforts.

California law enforcement has never had to deal with the type of violence we are witnessing from the drug cartels in Mexico. Politicians and police officers in Mexico are targeted simply because of their profession. They are being hunted down to intimidate the police to refrain from enforcement or support policies against the drug cartels. In June of 2008, Mexico's highest ranking federal police official and his bodyguard were assassinated as they ate lunch in an open market. On the same day, three police officers were killed by a 25-man cartel commando squad and weeks earlier, Mexico's federal police chief and three other top federal police officials were assassinated at their homes (Roig-Franzia). In March of 2011, a Mexican Police Chief sought asylum in the United States

after receiving death threats from a cartel. The Chief had only held the position for five months after replacing her predecessor who was shot to death by drug dealers. The U.S. has not commented on the asylum request, citing privacy and security concerns (Llorca).

California law enforcement is aware of the violence against the police just miles across the border but do not regularly train for the violence to spill over into their communities. It is imperative that we develop a comprehensive plan on how to coordinate, prepare, and hopefully prevent this violence from taking root in our communities. Local law enforcement does not normally train for gun battles against a large group of militants, or for suicide bombings being targeted at them and their families. If the current trend continues, this is exactly what law enforcement in California may be challenged with.

The National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy of the Office of National Drug Control Policy outlines the efforts of the federal government to work with local and state agencies against the illegal activities in Mexico that threaten communities in the United States. The report acknowledges that 90 percent of the cocaine that is destined for U.S. markets transits the Mexico/Central America corridor, and that Mexico is the primary foreign source of marijuana and methamphetamine destined for the United States. The report also states, "The reach of the cartels does not end inside of Mexico or on the Southwest border. Cells operating on behalf of these cartels have influence in over 300 U.S. cities."

Opponents of the Merida Initiative have described the current strategies a complete failure (Abbott). The growing perception in Mexico that their government has failed in its endeavor to tackle the drug cartels have been exacerbated by attacks to the civilian population. A recent Washington Post editorial indicated that more Mexican soldiers and police officers have died fighting the country's drug gangs in the past two years than the number of U.S. and NATO troops killed battling the Taliban. Of the thousands of people that died in 2008 in drug related violence, at least 500 were Mexican police and soldiers (Rocha).

The United States has increased equipment and training support for Mexico through a \$1.4 billion Merida initiative in June 2008 (Corcoran). In 2010, Mexico's President also asked the United States Congress to approve an additional \$400 million aid package to help Mexico confront the drug traffickers. The Merida Initiative is a counterdrug and anticrime assistance package for Mexico and Central America. The strategies include an early emphasis on training and equipping Mexican security forces engaged in counterdrug efforts, Mexico's pledge to intensify efforts against transnational criminal organizations, and the United States pledge to address drug demand and the illicit trafficking of firearms and bulk currency to Mexico. A four-pillar strategy of disrupting organized criminal groups, institutionalizing the rule of law in Mexico, building a 21<sup>st</sup> century border, and building strong and resilient communities are the main focus of the initiative. Central to the strategies of the aid packages are to keep the battles with the cartel on Mexican soil. With the level of corruption running

throughout the state and federal level of the Mexican government, this strategy appears to be on the path of failure. United States Army Colonel Philip Abbott believes the Merida Initiative is a flawed counterdrug policy and that it is following the same failed strategy as Plan Colombia, only on a larger scale (Abbott).

The latest efforts to secure the border are the use of United States unarmed drones flying over Mexico to provide the government of Mexico with information regarding the movement of the cartel. This program began in March of 2011, and it is too early to determine the impact it may have against the cartels and their movements into the United States.

If the past is a good prediction of the future, narcotic traffickers from Mexico appear to come and go into the United States with little to no detection, either through elaborate tunnels or by paying off corrupt officials. Criminal organizations have demonstrated enduring and ever-evolving capabilities to creatively construct and use tunnels to gain access beyond the border to transport narcotics, people, and other contraband into the United States. As of March 22, 2011, there were 135 tunnels discovered by U.S. law enforcement agencies. An example of the sophistication of some of these tunnels was the discovery of a 2,200-foot cross-border tunnel in San Diego, California. The tunnel traveled nearly half a mile at a depth of 90 feet and included shoring, electricity, ventilation, and a rail system to assist in ferrying contraband. It is estimated that this tunnel took more than a year to construct at a likely cost of \$1 million dollars (NSBCS). Violence has already been detected in Texas, Arizona,

and California. Local law enforcement, especially those with a high Hispanic population, must prepare for this type of violence in our communities.

Similar to 9/11, there are many warning signs are present, but the gravity of them appears to be ignored on a federal, state, and local level. As the research confirms, violence in Mexico is increasing in American border towns. Some of the violence committed in Mexico is being done by Mexican nationals who actually reside in the United States (Alonso). The FBI has warned that cartel operatives in the United States “are believed to be armed with assault rifles, bullet proof vests and grenades, and are occupying safe houses” in preparation for confrontations with U.S. border region law enforcement (Kimery). Texas native Edgar “La Barbie Valdez was captured in Mexico on August 31, 2010. Valdez was a leader of the Beltran Leyva nario-cartel (Schroeder).

Local law enforcement must continue to research the methods being utilized by the cartels in Mexico and begin training to prevent or reduce these types of incidents from occurring in their communities. During an August 3, 2010 CNN interview of an unidentified FBI analyst based in El Paso, Texas, the analyst described the Mexican cartels as being more dangerous than al Qaeda. With all of the intelligence of a mounting terrorist cartel operating on the border of our nation, increased law enforcement efforts and methods must occur. The Merida Initiative and the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics strategy are good starts, but local government needs additional resources and training to help protect their communities.

California law enforcement must also change the traditional methods used to police their communities if they are to minimize the violence seen in Mexico from taking root in the United States. Local law enforcement needs to partner with state and federal authorities to work in a collaborative effort on this serious public safety issue that reached far beyond that of any local community. In addition to the task forces that are already existing near the border towns, additional task forces made up of local, state, and federal officers should be created in each county across states bordering Mexico. This will allow local law enforcement to share intelligence information and improve the timeliness of the communication and the concentration of efforts. Municipal officers assigned to the task forces must be cross trained and authorized to enforce federal laws.

Since many of those involved in the violence are Mexican nationals involved narcotic trafficking, the local task forces also need to concentrate their efforts on illegal immigration, the smuggling of narcotics and firearms, and human trafficking. Local law enforcement needs access to existing data bases that track contacts and arrests so the information can be readily shared with other task forces.

Because the results of failing to act will be enormous, the task forces should be implemented on a state wide level. The California Police Chief's Association, State Attorney General, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Attorney General's Office should all be participants in the operation of the task forces, as well as the oversight of them.

Working collaboratively to secure the borders and relentlessly pursuing illegal Mexican nationals is the first vital step to prevent the violence from spreading to our communities. Working with a diverse group of community members to bring awareness to this issue should be the next step.

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