

**HOW WILL THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCY OF DRUG  
CARTELS IMPACT MID SIZE CALIFORNIA LAW  
ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES BY 2020?**

**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).

## **HOW WILL THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCY OF DRUG CARTELS IMPACT MID SIZED CALIFORNIA LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES BY 2020?**

It is a dark and eerie night. Vic, known to his friends as “Seaweed,” keeps a low profile as he and his friends work on a rooftop within sight of the American Consulate north of Aguas Calientes in Tijuana, Baja California. They find themselves here after a MUGI (Mini Unattended Ground Imager) alerted them to the presence of the most wanted man in the hemisphere, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman. Several MUGI’s were placed around the secluded compound over a month ago after radio chatter led analysts to believe he may be coming to the area. These MUGI’s are designed to detect, identify, and target individuals on the move.

Vic looks through the viewfinder of a state of the art Israeli-made laser designator and centers the crosshairs on a massive chimney shaft in the middle of the estate. The compound is in the outskirts of town; it’s gated and heavily guarded, and is known to be a residence of one of El Chapo’s top lieutenant’s responsible for the Tijuana plaza. There is no need to call in a strike as the MUGI’s advanced electronics automatically sends encrypted coordinates directly to the new and improved Predator drones flying over Otay Mesa. Shortly, the hellfire missiles strike their target creating a fantastic fireball. Vic takes his eyes away from the viewfinder and wipes his brows just as the blast of air hits his face. The year is 2015.

The “war on drugs” has been around for nearly five decades; too long for anyone to recall what the war was to accomplish or to give it a high priority - until now. Mexico is a state fighting for survival against narco-terrorism, and the U.S. is at war along its

southern border. Could anyone have seen the shifts and changes taking place below the stagnancy of the war?

### **HISTORY OF DRUG CARTELS IN MEXICO**

For nearly two centuries Mexican contraband traders have exploited the 2,000 mile border with the United States to move goods. By the 1960s, illicit drugs in the form of marijuana and heroin were being smuggled into the southwestern states via the well established routes. The traffickers had learned early on that in order to protect their business interests they had to establish and maintain vertical connections at all levels of government – federal, state, municipal, including police forces; and, to a lesser extent, the military. Corruption became the core of these connections and allowed these traffickers to operate unopposed and with impunity, as long as the Mexican public was unaffected. This “understanding,” if you will, created a pattern that perpetuated itself regardless of who the elected officials were. It worked seamlessly during the almost 80 years the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), with its predisposition to corruption, controlled the country. Corruption became institutionalized in Mexico and the foundation for both a socially tolerated practice and the Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) to come was unwittingly laid.

Then, one of several shifts occurred. In the 1980s, sustained U.S. interdiction efforts made it very difficult for the Colombian cartels; with their Caribbean trafficking routes compromised, the profits dried up.<sup>1</sup> More and more, the Colombian Cartels began to depend on the Mexicans to transport and smuggle their product. This shift paved the way for Mexico’s first large drug trafficking organization, the Guadalajara Cartel. The members of this group, as is with most traditional cartels, were not only tightly knit, they

were more than just partners; blood ran deep as many were related by blood, marriage or acquaintances from the small farming towns they came from. The Guadalajara Cartel controlled vast territories unopposed, until, having grown in power, the Gulf Cartel expanded into cocaine trafficking and they became rivals from the start.

These patterns continued to repeat, but now on a grander scale – the moving of bulk shipments of cocaine from the producers in South America to Central America and Mexico by airplane and boat, and then into the United States by land (including littoral maritime), commercial trucks, privately owned vehicles, human “mules,” fast speed boats, ultra-light aircrafts, submarines, and sophisticated tunnels under the border. A process facilitated by both legal and illegal immigration of Mexicans into the U.S.

In 1985, the Guadalajara Cartel kidnapped, tortured and killed DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena. He had been working in Guadalajara for four years now to assess how powerful the Guadalajara Cartel had become. He had built ties with the head of the Guadalajara Cartel, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, “El Padrino” (the Godfather), who felt Camarena had crossed the line.<sup>2</sup> The United States government closed the border (temporarily), launched a major murder investigation and pressured the Mexican government to act swiftly; the cartel leaders went on the run. This marked the end for the Guadalajara Cartel, but also the beginning of separate cartels as El Padrino divided his organization among his lieutenants from behind bars after his arrest by Mexican authorities in 1989.<sup>3</sup>

The Sinaloa Cartel went to El Chapo who quickly re-established important connections with politicians, business elite, and police and military authorities. Cocaine was incredibly profitable and was bringing unimaginable sums of money to the cartels.

Money became the center of gravity for the cartels and they were going to do whatever it took to get it. Cartels began warring resulting in horrific and unprecedented violence becoming the norm. Who could have predicted what lay ahead?

The increased violence resulted in another important shift; the leader of the Gulf Cartel, Osiel Cardenas Guillen, was first to form a paramilitary force as an enforcement and protection arm. This force was comprised of deserters from a Mexican special forces unit, known as GAFE; a highly trained anti-terrorist unit, and took the name of Los Zetas after their military call signs. The Gulf cartel gave the Zetas the green light to go “all out” against the Sinaloa Cartel, and the beheading and dismemberment began.<sup>4</sup> Cities south of the border began to broil in violence.

Los Zetas were militaristic and unconventional in their approach to defending the Gulf Cartel from the government and from rivals. Not being a traditional criminal organization, they didn't follow the established “understanding” and didn't follow the operational rules. Using fear and intimidation as a tactic, their brutal acts of violence, including against civilians, changed the way cartels operated. The “understanding” was broken. The violence became so great that in 2008 the *U.S. Joint Forces Command* reported that Mexico, behind Pakistan, could become a failed state and threaten U.S. national security.<sup>5</sup> The Gulf Cartel won this round; however, the Zetas broke from it and became a cartel in its own right. The warring continued and no one anticipated how it would evolve.

The warring between the cartels is believed by some experts to be the true start of the current drug war and not the inauguration of Felipe Calderon as Mexico's President.<sup>6</sup> To curtail the horrific and reckless violence, President Calderon resorted to using the

military to take the war to the cartels. As is frequently the case with government intentions, however, irony and unintended consequence often results. For example, “ironically...immigration policy emphasizing increased border security and enforcement has had the unintended effect of illegal immigrants staying longer in the U.S.”<sup>7</sup> The public was severely affected in a number of ways, and fear was rampant.

Concurrently, a number of events were taking place that, although independent of each other, are inextricably related. Alliances became fragile as enemies became partners and partners became enemies. The Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas emerged as the two most powerful cartels with remnants of former cartels siding and aligning with one or the other. The violence accelerated.

### **United States Intervention – A strategy to diminish drug violence**

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. efforts shifted attention from the war on drugs to combating terrorism and nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq. This created a scenario where the United States essentially ignored the potential National threat festering next door - the soaring drug-related violence in Mexico.

Recently, Mexican security cooperation has increased significantly largely as a result of U.S. backing with the Mérida Initiative, a \$1.5 billion dollar measure to aid anti-trafficking initiatives in Mexico and Central American countries.<sup>8</sup> The measure, though, has shown few positive results. According to Dr. Robert J. Bunker, a senior fellow with *Small Wars Journal*, the Mérida Initiative is “simply too myopic to do much good by itself - it misses much of the bigger threat picture that exists.” He points out that we have ignored “a new type of threat which has arisen far closer to home,” and argues that plans and U.S. aid need to be merged together into a more encompassing Western Hemisphere

Strategy, “and with a greater sense of strategic urgency than most Congressional policy makers might *a priori* think is necessary.”<sup>9</sup> Many experts agree that until domestic demand in the U.S. for illicit drugs decreases, economics will govern and the money the U.S. spends on eradication and source control will simply be wasted.

Overall, there is a growing belief the war on drugs has failed. In 2011, the Global Commission on Drug Policy, a self-appointed 19- member commission consisting of world leaders declared, “the war on drugs has failed” and encouraged drug legalization.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in 2012 the Organization of American States (OAS) held its Sixth Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Columbia in which past and current Latin American leaders said the war on drugs isn’t working and pressed President Obama to consider alternatives to drug prohibition.<sup>11</sup> While the kingpin strategy resulted in the capture or killing of some major players and in large seizures of drugs, the cartels continue their operations. While governments have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into suppression, interdiction and enforcement, price and purity are the standards for measuring success. Currently, even though seizures of methamphetamine super labs have rocketed, it has not affected supply, and cost is low and purity high.

In the midst of these efforts, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas are trying to outdo each other in bloodshed and continue their fight for control of supplies, trafficking routes, dominance and survival. This has not only raised the violence to an incredible level, but has also forced them to adapt, overcome, improvise and diversify. They resorted to kidnapping, extortion, murder and human trafficking to compensate for revenue losses in turbulent times.<sup>12</sup> Although the level of violence has not spilled over into American border towns as some feared, it has taken place not just near the border, but also in cities

across the country – Phoenix became the kidnapping capital of the world in 2009, and in Laredo, Texas, the murder rate rocketed.<sup>13</sup> All of these crimes are concerns for U.S. law enforcement.

In addition, the DTOs are creative in finding new ways to transport their product from the border towns to all across the United States. Not only do the routes constantly change to take advantage of any angle that presents itself but is facilitated by associating with gangs on both side of the border.<sup>14</sup> According to the 2011 U.S. Department of Justice Report DTOs have a presence in 230 cities in the United States.<sup>15</sup> The gangs are learning from the cartels and together are becoming ever more sophisticated and deadly organizations. Dr. Bunker argues this gang and cartel evolution gives rise to new “warmaking entities” that are challenging the existing power structure in Mexico through violence (against everyone) and social/environmental modifications (narcocultura) and, in the process, create their own vision of what the human condition and relationship should be (reminiscent of Al Qaeda).<sup>16</sup> He posits, “no longer is insurgency viewed from a purely political or ideological lens as it now has post-modern implications” – the undermining of government control to increase their control.

With the exception of a few, including Rep. Connie Mack (R-Fla.), chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, many in our government are unwilling to call what is taking place in Mexico an insurgency or terrorism. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed the DTOs were “morphing” into an insurgency and in 2011, Undersecretary of the Army Joseph Westphal said it was an insurgency. Both retracted and apologized for their reference to the “I” word.<sup>17</sup> Yet, there is growing evidence it is, in fact, just that.

A report, *Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment* prepared by retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, a former U.S. drug czar and Southern Command commander of U.S. troops in Latin America, and Gen. Robert Scales, former commandant of the United States Army War College, concluded, “crime, gangs, and terrorism have converged in such a way that they form a collective threat to the national security of the United States.”<sup>18</sup> McCaffrey and Scales claimed, “today’s crime wars and narco-terrorism affect the national security situation and policies of nation states from Bolivia to Columbia, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States,” and “local law enforcement simply are not equipped to prosecute these wars.” What is incomprehensible is that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported to Congress that Defense Department leadership had told top Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials “there is no comprehensive southwest border security strategy.”<sup>19</sup> Later, in a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs hearing, DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano said she was unaware of the GAOs audit and concerns.<sup>20</sup> One might ask; is anyone paying attention?

Chief Sigi Gonzalez, Zapata County Sheriff, Texas (site of Falcon Lake and cartel cover-up) is a member of the Southwestern Border Sheriff’s Coalition. He has testified before Congressional committees with the aim of obtaining assistance from Washington by relaying the realities of what is taking place along their border, including the sighting of Russian helicopters by one of his deputies. Not only was his statement dismissed, he was told his deputy was “lying” (a picture of the Russian helicopter was presented to no avail).<sup>21</sup> As happens often in crisis, there is hope that new leadership in Mexico might change the equation.

On July 1, 2012, Mexico elected a new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, of the PRI party. Although it is unknown what his war on drugs strategy will be, he said that reducing the cartel violence was a priority. Prior to the election, however, all the candidates had vouched not to negotiate with the drug cartels. The Zetas issued an open challenge to both U.S. and Mexican government which said, “Message to the nation, the government, and all of Mexico and to public opinion: The special forces of Los Zetas challenges the government of Mexico and its federal forces.”<sup>22</sup> The Zetas bring a new dimension to the war on drugs. They use military tactics and brutal displays of force that includes beheadings and targeting of civilians.<sup>23</sup> They disregard the “understanding” of traditional cartels, and have now officially challenged the government. Does this not sound like terrorism and a threat to the Mexican population? We have all heard stories of unlikely bedfellows, but what if the cartels consolidated forces (until they could operate without interference); could Mexico be able to respond? Although this may be unlikely, it is plausible and a threat to the hemisphere. The implications in this global world would be unprecedented.

In his book “Eternal Battle Against Evil,” Paul Chabot notes that DTOs, like Al – Qaeda, have a remarkably strong organizational structure to prevent failure. They have a redundant system in place to maintain sustainability. He examined the key elements of organizational resiliency and proposes, noting “The key to fully dismantling DTOs and evil of all sorts is to simply understand what keeps them alive and focus on attacking those sustaining pillars of the enemy’s strength.”<sup>24</sup> He describes the process as peeling an onion, layer by layer until one gets to the core and destroys it. Although politicians on both sides of the border have made feel good but outlandish claims e.g., “the border is

more secure than ever,” this is not reality. Gary “Rusty” Fleming, producer of the documentary video “Drug Wars; Silver or Lead” and author of “Drug Wars: “Narco Warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” calls this the “Chamber of Commerce attitude,” and adds that denial doesn’t make it go away.<sup>25</sup> Yet, it seems that few, if anyone, want to take responsibility or be accountable. Could it be that it’s a politician’s imperative to be unrealistic and deny the truth, and then have the finesse to shift the blame when things go wrong?

The drug war is a highly complex problem, and like immigration, it is simply not just a policy, law enforcement, or societal issue, but a global issue as well. Many Americans have drug abuse problem. America is the world’s largest drug consuming market, and Mexican DTOs will continue to provide it as long as there is a market. Although the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report in 2011 estimated the U.S. drug market at \$39 billion, some experts believe \$60-\$70 billion may be more accurate.<sup>26</sup> This incentive is just too great for the DTOs to willingly stop supplying drugs to Americans. Although consumption has remained stable, marijuana is becoming ever more popular with the 12-18 year olds; one third of teenagers now hold dangerous low perceptions of the risks of drug use.<sup>27</sup> A target group the cartels have not fully exploited. Bunker notes a great problem still exists about past governmental policies and stresses “not only do we have to get the threat right but we also have to get the policies right too. Otherwise, huge sums of funding will continue to be spent on useless mitigating measures.”<sup>28</sup>

Trouble is looming in the horizon on its way to America. We didn’t see the shifts taking place in the stagnancy of the war on drugs, we looked at events as independent and

unrelated, and have failed to recognize the threat for what it was. Prohibition remains our strategy with large sums of money poured into it with no analysis for what it's doing, resulting in what is commonly referred to as squeezing the balloon effect. Our politicians are in denial and perhaps view this problem as too politically sensitive. The Cartagena Summit is undertaking a multi-year comprehensive study to review the problem, how we got here, statistics, data, and the research in an attempt to reach the best options for change. Power may shift to a non-state insurgency, and a wall will not stop the move north.

While we wait however, more than ever, law enforcement must form collaborative and cooperative county or area coalitions to support one another, increase both vertical and horizontal communication and share intelligence to enhance public safety in our communities; the California Border Alliance Group (CBAG) can greatly assist in this. In the meantime...Vic's sat-cell phone rings. His team is off on a counterinsurgency (COIN) mission tonight.

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