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A Mexican marine stands guard as 26 tons of cocaine burns behind him in Manzanillo, Mexico, on Nov. 28, 2007. The drugs were seized from a ship in the port city of Manzanillo in one of the biggest drug busts on record.

Could Mexico Fail?

AP PHOTO/EDUARDO VERDUGO

THE LAWLESSNESS ALONG THE MEXICAN BORDER HAS GONE WAY BEYOND A LOCAL CRIME WAVE: THERE HAS BEEN A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN ARMED ROBBERIES, NOT BY LONE GUNMEN BUT BY HEAVILY ARMED GANGS. KIDNAPPINGS AND HOMICIDES ARE WAY UP—AND NOT JUST MURDERS BUT BEHEADINGS. POLICE ARE GETTING INTO SHOOTOUTS WHERE THEY ARE FREQUENTLY OUT-GUNNED. IT IS STARTING TO LOOK LIKE A TERRORIST CAMPAIGN. RAIL LINES AND BRIDGES ARE BEING SABOTAGED, AND NOW AN ENTIRE TRAIN HAS BEEN DERAILED AND ITS PASSENGERS ASSAULTED AND ROBBED.

Isolated ranches and small towns have turned into virtual garisons. Economic activity, especially in southern Texas, has seriously declined. People are frightened, and they are mean. Everyone seems to be carrying a weapon and shooting on suspicion. Mexicans are the targets. There have been disturbing reports of summary executions and lynchings by vigilante volunteers.

Central government authority no longer exists in the Mexican states along the US border. Warlords, commanding their own armies, are gunning down their rivals. Except for refugees heading north and guns being smuggled south, commerce across the frontier has ceased to exist. Some of the gangs are holed up in their sanctuaries just across the border, but the government in Mexico City cannot, or will not, bring the situation under control.

Although much of the violence along the border appears to be purely criminal, evidence of a subversive political plan has been uncovered. Mexican extremists have declared it their goal to recover the “lost territories”—land taken from Mexico after the Mexican-American War in 1848.

The plan calls for enlisting Mexicans residing in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas in a campaign to terrorize and drive out the Anglo population, thereby ending decades of what the planners call Yankee discrimination and tyranny. The movement, which apparently draws on support from some of the warlords in Mexico, appears to have few adherents on the American side of the border, but it could be the forerunner of a large-scale uprising on US territory. As a consequence of the terrible economic situation caused by the violence, there are many unemployed, restless men who might be receptive to radicalization and recruitment. And if the situation in Mexico is not brought under control, foreign foes of the United States, determined to distract US leaders from issues elsewhere in the world, will find opportunities to exploit. With the new challenges the US administration faces overseas, Washington has reason to fear unrest on its own territory.

The United States has already deployed more than half of the mobile forces of the US Army on the border with Mexico. The president’s federalization of the National Guard to reinforce the regular forces has brought an additional 150,000 troops to the frontier. Military commanders want a freer hand to go after armed groups just across the border, but that could easily lead to war with Mexico. The Mexican army is no match for US forces, but limited US forays into Mexico might achieve little, while an invasion and occupation could prove costly. The president is desperate to eliminate the possibility of an incident that might compel US military intervention in Mexico, which some prominent political leaders argue is the only solution.

SAVAGE STRUGGLE

on the
Border
Part II

By **BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS**

This grim assessment of the situation is not some imaginative movie script extrapolated from recent headlines or a hypothetical future scenario to be gamed at the Pentagon. These events—the crime wave, the armed attacks, the beheadings, the lynchings, the scheme to recover the lost territories, the deployment of much of the US Army and almost the entire National Guard—actually occurred in 1915 and 1916, when the Mexican Revolution left northern Mexico in chaos.

The Mexican Revolution, from 1910 to 1920, engulfed the entire border region. Revolutionaries found sympathy and support on the US side,

raised money and recruited soldiers in the cities and towns of the Southwest and bought guns. Whether and how officials in Washington chose to apply the US neutrality laws, which prohibited the arming of foreign armies from US soil, made the United States a player in the conflict. Whatever they decided in Washington, smuggling flourished on the border.

The railroads were of strategic importance. Built by US investors, Mexico’s rail lines ran south from the border; the only east-west line ran just north of the frontier. If the Mexican government or one of the rebel armies wanted to rapidly redeploy or reinforce forces in northern Mexico, it had to use the US line. By granting or withholding permission, the United States could influence the outcome of battles in Mexico and would draw the wrath of the losing side.

Battles for the border towns imperiled adjacent cities on the US side. In some cases, the defenders deployed in a way that obliged the attackers to shoot northward. Attackers would assault parallel to the border to avoid casualties on the US side.

The political turmoil in Mexico precipitated a crime wave in the United States. The distinction between combatant and bandit was situational. Heavily armed, desperate men marauded towns on both sides of the frontier, but in late 1914 and 1915, the violence escalated, especially in southern Texas, where the attacks were beginning to take on a political complexion. Seeking to exploit the intense nationalism generated by the revolution, a small group of conspirators in Mexico promulgated the “Plan of San Diego.” It called for the recovery of the lost territories, the land that Mexico had been forced to cede to the United States following the Mexican-American War. To accomplish this, the conspirators exhorted Mexicans north of the border to overthrow their oppressors and assert their rightful independence. Feb. 20, 1915, was the date set for the uprising. On that day, subscribers to the plan were to rise up in arms, proclaiming the liberty of the Latin race and its independence of Yankee tyranny, “which has held us in iniquitous slavery since remote times,” as they put it. The rebels would proclaim the independence of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Upper California. Every white North American over sixteen years of age was to be killed. African-Americans were invited to join the movement, in return for which they would receive six states north of those already mentioned. The Apaches would have their lands returned to them.

Except in the lower Rio Grande Valley, where the Mexican population was subject to the most discrimination, the Plan of San Diego was largely ignored. Feb. 20 came and went without the predicted uprising, but the crime wave escalated.

Ordered to investigate the growing lawlessness in the area, Gen. Frederick Funston, commanding the American forces on the border, concluded that it was criminal, not political. The army continued its patrols along the border, but refused to assume any responsibility for

law enforcement within the states. As the violence increased, Funston did contemplate declaring martial law, but he decided it was too extreme. However, Army patrols were ordered to treat all armed bands in the area as invaders.

The locals were terrified and increasingly took matters into their own hands. As shootings and lynchings increased, a worried Funston called for reinforcements. Their arrival confirmed Mexico's suspicions of imminent US military intervention. The commander of Mexico's garrison then called for reinforcements on his side, which Funston, in turn, interpreted as an ominous move. Washington was fearful that an imprudent move on either side could precipitate a war. While US diplomats worked to resolve the chaotic situation in Mexico, the violence along the border continued.

Various solutions were proposed. The jingoist press called for the annexation of Mexico. Funston suggested that the United States negotiate an agreement with Mexico that would give US troops the right of pursuit into Mexico (as they had had in the campaigns against the Apaches). One US senator proposed the construction of permanent forts along the Rio Grande. Another official suggested that US forces occupy a strip of land 10 miles wide on the Mexican side of the border. Yet another proposed that a strip of land 1 mile wide north of the border be cleared of all brush so that troops could monitor movements across the frontier. Funston added to his pursuit proposal the mobilization of Apache Scouts and bloodhounds, and he requested that he be allowed to order "no quarter" during the pursuit. The secretary of war disagreed, but more troops were sent south.

In 1916, attention shifted to the western border, where Pancho Villa, outraged by his defeat at Agua Prieta, across the border from Douglas, Ariz., launched an attack on Columbus, NM. The Mexican government garrison in Agua Prieta had been reinforced by rail through American territory. Villa's men were slaughtered in the attack, and Villa was determined to get his revenge. Actually, his plan was more strategic than merely vengeful. The raid on Columbus would almost certainly provoke US military intervention, which would set his two enemies, the governments of Mexico and the United States, now allied against him, against each other. It nearly worked. As Gen. John Pershing crossed the border to pursue Villa deep into Mexico, tensions increased between Mexico and the United States. Pershing's expedition was withdrawn in 1917.

Outside meddling

Throughout the years of the Mexican Revolution, there were fears that a hostile foreign power would take advantage of the chaotic situation in Mexico to establish military bases, perhaps to wage war on the United States. Most of the concerns focused on the supposed ambitions of Japan to obtain a naval base on the Pacific Coast of Mexico. This fit well with the hysteria generated in the United States, especially in California, by fear of the "Yellow Peril." California's sensationalist

press fanned these fears. So did German agents, whose objective from 1914 on was to propel the United States into a war with Mexico, which would keep it out of the war in Europe.

In 1915, German agents plotted with former Mexican President Victoriano Huerta, who had been overthrown in 1914 by revolutionaries with the help of the United States. The Germans offered to help restore him to power, which would inevitably lead to US intervention. American officials were onto the plot, however, and they arrested Huerta as he stepped off the train in El Paso.

When Pancho Villa's forces attacked Columbus in 1916, German agents on the border became superhawks calling for immediate US military intervention. The Germans then approached President Venustiano Carranza, who deeply resented the continued presence of Pershing's forces in Mexico. They offered Carranza a deal: If the United States appeared about to enter the war in Europe, Mexico could count on German support to wage war on the United States and recover the lost territories. The Germans suggested that Japan be invited to participate in the alliance. These terms were laid out in a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German ambassador in Mexico. The infamous secret Zimmermann telegram was sent on Jan. 16, 1917, but was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence, which promptly turned it over to the American ambassador in London.

Here it was, the sum of all fears, a German-Japanese alliance with Mexico to provoke an uprising in the United States and take back the lost territories. It is not clear what troops or other military assistance Germany might have provided Mexico in 1917 or whether or not Japan was interested in joining a war with the United States. When the telegram was reported in the press, Zimmermann publicly admitted that he had sent it. One suspects that, while Germany would have liked to see the United States and Mexico in a war, the telegram might have been intended primarily to keep the Americans worried about their southern flank. But Carranza had little appetite for war with the United States, and President Woodrow Wilson was determined to avoid war with Mexico. Wilson and Carranza settled their differences, Pershing's column was withdrawn, and on April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.

No guarantees

The point of this history lesson is that current concerns about the growing lawlessness in northern Mexico and its consequences for US national security are not without precedent—and not that far-fetched. A peaceful southern border is not a guarantee of national security.

With the end of the revolution, things settled down on the border, but some of the same sorts of problems that emerged between 1910 and 1920 arose in later years. There were concerns about German agents in Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s, and after World War II, there were worries about Soviet agents and Communist subversion.



Pancho Villa (center, in the presidential chair) surrounded by fellow revolutionaries. His 1916 raid on Columbus, NM prompted a US expedition and nearly caused a US-Mexican war.

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The Cold War also raised concerns about the clandestine delivery of nuclear weapons. After Sept. 11, 2001, the major concern was that terrorists might smuggle weapons of mass destruction across the border.

The appearance of a tiny domestic terrorist movement in Mexico in the 1970s, the Zapatista insurgency in southern Mexico in the 1990s and the confrontations following the disputed election of Felipe Calderon raised questions about Mexico's ability to handle internal dissent without provoking wider resistance through oppressive measures.

Of great current concern to the United States is the apparent inability of Mexico to suppress the drug gangs that infest the northern half of the country. They derive huge profits that enable them to corrupt Mexico's police and judiciary and have diversified into the smuggling of human beings across the border.

The level of criminal violence and corruption in Mexico has obliged Mexico's president to increasingly rely on the army to challenge the activities of the drug lords and their private militias. That risks corrupting the army itself.

On the US side, the continuing flow of drugs and illegal immigrants has resulted in a growing worry that the violence south of the border will spread north. This is a domestic law enforcement problem, but it has already prompted a significant buildup in physical border security measures and deployments of the National Guard, not to mention a motley militia of volunteers. Could the border with Mexico again become a national security concern?

The nature of the threat

Nothing on the political horizon even vaguely indicates that Mexico is heading for another revolution or that its political system is on the brink of collapse (a very dubious CIA assertion in the 1980s). Decades of one-party rule have been transformed into a tumultuous two-party, sometimes three-party competition. A low-level insurgency sputters on in the southern state of Chiapas, and occasional small-scale bombings indicate an extremist fringe on the far left, but none of this poses a serious security challenge.

The threat comes from the proliferation of criminal gangs profiting from the trafficking of heroin and cocaine into the United States. Organized gangs engage in kidnapping, and they are believed to have taken over the business of smuggling people desperate for work across the border. Feeble law enforcement efforts are hamstrung by corruption that extends high into Mexico's political apparatus. President Calderon has tried to solve this problem by relying on the army instead of the police to go after the gangs, and he has had a measure of success in killing or capturing some of the most notorious gang leaders. But Mexico's gangs have not been reluctant to fight back, taking on the state through assassination of high-ranking officials and terror campaigns.

If the army continues to press them, the violence could easily escalate. Mexico's gangs could carry out large-scale terrorist bombings, as the narco traffickers did in Colombia, as a warning to authorities to back off. The gangs could also finance local terrorist groups to distract authorities.

The deterioration of northern Mexico from crime-ridden to crime-ruled would be gradual and insidious. Nominal state author-

ity would still exist, and local political leaders would continue to be elected and make speeches. Police would continue to deal with petty crime. Commerce would continue. Superficially, northern Mexico might appear normal—a failed state does not necessarily have to look like Somalia, the guerrilla-infested departments of Colombia or the North West province of Pakistan. But no-go areas and untouchable crime bosses protected by heavily armed private armies would point to the real locus of power if the central government decided that rooting out the criminals was not worth the blood and treasure it would require. From Mexico's perspective, illegal immigration and drug consumption are US problems.

MEXICO'S GANGS COULD CARRY OUT LARGE-SCALE TERRORIST BOMBINGS, AS THE NARCO TRAFFICKERS DID IN COLOMBIA, AS A WARNING TO AUTHORITIES TO BACK OFF.

Although this situation would hardly be good news for the US war on drugs, the United States could live with it. Concerns would increase only if American expatriates living in Mexico became regular victims of criminal violence, or especially if the violence were to spread across the border into

the United States. The expatriates could always decide to leave if things got too dangerous. But it may be difficult to prevent the violence from spreading across the border if Mexican drug traffickers compete to take control of downstream distribution or decide to engage in other criminal operations in the United States.

Those, too, would be regarded as law enforcement problems if and until the violence reached intolerable levels, which would make it increasingly, as during the Mexican Revolution, a matter of national security.

There is also the much-feared (and much exaggerated) possibility that the crime bosses might smuggle terrorists or weapons of terror into the United States. There is no evidence of linkages between Mexico's gangs and foreign terrorist organizations, and it is to be hoped that gang leaders are smart enough not to imperil their highly profitable businesses by doing things that would unleash an all-out US-led effort to destroy them. But there is always the possibility that a gang might be tempted by a huge cash offer, or that a gang under pressure might in desperation be willing to take the risk or simply would consider itself invulnerable to US retaliation.

Except for the period during the Mexican Revolution, the United States has no experience living next door to a failed state. Its options for containing the violence produced by the revolution were not very good then, and given the number of Americans living in Mexico and the importance of trade with Mexico, they are even less attractive now.

The United States could, of course, take two bold steps: It could dramatically reduce the Mexican traffickers' profits—and therefore their power to corrupt—by treating drug consumption as a social problem and investing more in domestic demand reduction and treatment, as many policy-research studies have recommended. Source-country control and interdiction are the costliest and least effective components of the US war on drugs. As long as US demand remains high, criminals will draw huge profits.

The United States could also move to legalize and fully integrate the more than 12 million illegal immigrants in the country, the majority of whom are from Mexico, and adopt a system of work visas that reduces the need for running the border and takes the profit out of human smuggling. Thus far, the United States has addressed illegal immigration from a legal and economic perspec-

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tive, but there is a national security aspect to it, as well. It is simply not in the national security interest of the United States to have a floating underworld population of 12 million people who are vulnerable to blackmail and other pressure. The security of the nation would be better served by legalizing and fully integrating them into society; however unpopular that may be with certain sectors of the American electorate. In any case, neither of these approaches seems likely to be implemented.

If violence emanating from Mexico reached intolerable levels on the US side of the frontier, the United States could gradually seal the border. The Great Wall approach already has popular appeal and political traction. But it would have serious adverse consequences on both sides of the frontier, increasing unemployment in Mexico and disrupting manufacturing in the United States. (Protectionists and wall proponents will argue that unemployment in Mexico is not our problem and that sealing the border would reduce outsourcing of jobs.)

As it was in 1916, military intervention is a measure of last resort. Unless Mexico were to collapse into anarchy, it is hard to envision Pershing's columns again moving south. Yet it is not unimaginable to foresee limited interventions to rescue Americans held hostage, Special Forces captures of criminal warlords wanted in the United States or covert strikes on criminal headquarters. Any such action would stoke Mexican nationalism, which is driven mainly by anti-American sentiments, especially among the country's intelligentsia. It would guarantee the hostility of the Mexican government.

The United States could offer more material and technical assistance to Mexico's underfunded law enforcement establishment. The problem here is again corruption and human rights concerns. The United States could also try to expand its cooperation with the Mexican Army, which now has the lead in tackling organized crime in northern Mexico. The Mexican army, however, is a conservative, closed establishment, usually suspicious of and generally cool to US engagement.

Finally, the United States could discreetly assist Mexican authorities with intelligence that would enable them to operate more effectively against the gangs, but the problem here is the disturbing degree of penetration of Mexico's criminal intelligence and law enforcement by the criminals themselves. Indeed, some US agencies refuse to share any intelligence with Mexican authorities. Nonetheless, US authorities should take advantage of the likelihood that the threat the gangs pose to the United States is not immediate. There will be time to gradually develop intelligence sources, which can take years, if it is made a priority now.

It is possible that Mexican authorities will gradually contain the gangs and that the surge in violence seen in recent months is a spike, not a trend. The probability of Mexico becoming a failed state still seems extremely low. In such circumstances, precipitate US action might only exacerbate the situation in Mexico. But simply ignoring the danger is not an option. Nor will the security issues be resolved by the current US obsession with building a wall. **HST**

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS is recognized as a leading authority on terrorism and is senior advisor to the president of RAND Corporation. His most recent book is *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* published in 2008 by Prometheus Books, New York. He is currently working on a book on Mexico.

Next month, in the last article of this 3-part series, Jana Schroeder, Homeland Security Today's Mexico City correspondent, reports on the politics of Mexico's savage struggle.