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**OUR OWN BACK YARD:
MEXICO AND U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Political crisis, economic instability, armed revolt, and the rise of criminal organizations within Mexico pose a significant danger to the Southwest border of the United States. The importance of Mexico to our National Security has been mentioned in policy statements but has been marginalized when contrasted with other more traditional overseas threats.

The author seeks to highlight several points of concern such as the changes in the Mexican political process, existing armed insurrection, economic collapses and illegal immigration. These points are viewed in conjunction with a brief overview of the history of Mexico and U.S.-Mexican relations over the last century.

The author urges that, because of the proximity of Mexico, its growing economic ties to the U.S., and the increase in the Mexican-American population within the U.S., we must have a better understanding of Mexico in order to prepare appropriate courses of action should Mexico undergo future large scale political or economic upheaval which will have an impact on our National Security.

OUR OWN BACK YARD:

MEXICO AND U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

Gary A. Pappas

In the years ahead the United States will face many challenges. Some will be from conventional and anticipated sources, but others may come from unexpected actors and may be in forms which today would seem unimportant. We tend to think of future threats to the national security in terms of military threats, terrorist activities, or even information warfare. However, we take for granted many aspects of our national security. In looking toward the early part of the next century, United States policy makers have listed out areas in the world, and countries which will be possible future competitors. The obvious geographical areas of concern have been enumerated in countless articles, policy

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statements, and papers. One area, however, which has only received brief mention, and has been largely overlooked, is North America itself -our own back yard.

In examining potential threats to the national security of the United States we must look, not only across the oceans but in our own area of the world. Our closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico present circumstances which could in the future develop into crises having significant implications for the security of the United States.

The situation that immediately comes to mind is the possible secession of Quebec from Canada and the issues which would arise from such action. Another such area of concern is the Southwest border of the United States. The ability of a nation-state to control its borders is a primary measure of the sovereignty of a nation. The Southwest border has historically been a challenge to our ability to have effective control of our borders. There the specter of a failed state lurks at our doorstep.

In assessing an area of potential crisis, we should strive to have at least a basic understanding of the actors and political climate of such an area. Other than the debate

over the inclusion of Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 90's, illegal immigration and attention to drug issues, little is known or understood by the American public of the internal political structure of Mexico or the history of Mexican-American relations from the beginning of the 20th century and how these factors have had an effect upon U.S. national security.

This paper seeks to briefly examine the potential problems which may arise along our Southwest border. Considered are Mexico's political system and recent history, illegal immigration, potential terrorist sponsored activities, and the increasing power of non-state actors, such as drug trafficking organizations using the U.S.-Mexican border as a major entry point into the United States.

The publication A National Security Strategy For A New Century¹ makes mention of North America as an area of potential interest as does the Report of the National Defense Panel (NDP)². These statements of public policy list various transnational areas of concern such as organized crime, drug smuggling, illegal immigration, and instability resulting from corruption, political and social upheaval, and population shifts which may result therefrom. The policy

planners have however given only minimal consideration to these issues as threats to the future security of the United States as they relate to our borders, particularly in the Southwest. When one considers the impact of these factors on our most vital interests, it becomes apparent that potential threats may emerge from these non-traditional areas of concern which can have a profound effect on our way of life. We need to be more aware of recent developments in Mexico and their potential impact on both U.S. society and security in order to plan for appropriate responses, politically, economically, and, if necessary, by the use of our military forces.

Intervention: The United States has for most of the 20th Century had the luxury of having had no real need to invest its resources in protecting its land borders from invasion by a foreign power. Only once in this century has a non-state actor actually crossed the U.S.-Mexican border and taken American lives and property³. The raid of Pancho Villa into Columbus, New Mexico in March, 1916 is only a colorful footnote in our history, but the historical background leading up to this incursion into the U.S. and its aftermath bear closer examination as does constant monitoring of our

neighbor to the South.

The United States-Mexican relations from the mid 19th century to the present have been tortuous at best. The independence of Texas, the Mexican War, and the incursions by the United States into Mexico during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) have resulted in the loss by Mexico of nearly one third of her territory and, as during the Mexican Revolution, a loss of nearly one fourth of her population⁴. The scars left on the Mexican soul by various U.S. interventions during this century cannot be underestimated. Being the poor neighbor to a super power is not an easy task. These factors, when coupled with Mexico's post revolutionary political system, require careful and skillful statesmanship by the United States to help prevent serious and deep rooted antipathy toward the United States from developing into a crisis.

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 with the overthrow of the dictator Porfirio Diaz. Mexico was then thrown into 2 decades of instability and violence with 3 revolutionary Generals fighting for political and military control⁵.

The cast of characters included such legendary figures as Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Venustiano

Carranza. Each led his own private army claiming to be the true champion of the Revolution.

The Revolution spilled over the U.S.-Mexican border with the March 9, 1916 raid into Columbus, New Mexico, and an attack on a small U.S. cavalry garrison by Pancho Villa. Until the end of 1915, Villa had made every effort to respect the United States interests. He became disillusioned and felt utterly betrayed when the Wilson Administration recognized Carranza as the head of Mexican government on October 19, 1915⁶. Villa led the March, 1916 raid for the purpose of obtaining supplies, arms and money.

The raid into U.S. territory prompted the "Punitive Expedition" led by General John Pershing⁷. The purpose of the expedition was to capture Villa, an event which never occurred. A number of theories have been advanced as to why Villa embarked on a perilous mission which put Mexico itself at risk. The most plausible is Villa's desire for revenge against the U.S. for its betrayal of him⁸. It was not until July 28, 1920, after the death of Carranza, did Villa and the last of his armed followers surrendered. Villa was eventually assassinated in July, 1923 thus marking an end to this chapter of the Revolution.

Villa's exploits and his incursion into New Mexico can be likened to present day events. In the 1990s, it is drug organizations which "invade" the border towns. With seemingly limitless amounts of money, local law enforcement officials have been corrupted, and violent deaths have occurred⁹. Such events have given rise in some quarters for a new military presence to deter this new "invasion".

Politics: The Mexican post-revolutionary political system may outwardly appear to be democratic with "free" presidential elections every six years and a non-succession law which prohibits re-election of a President¹⁰. Outward appearances can be deceptive. The same political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), has held control of the entire political apparatus of Mexico continuously for nearly seventy years and is now the world's oldest controlling political party. The incumbent President chooses his successor from within the party (PRI) and the selected candidate stands in the national election, usually facing only nominal opposition¹¹.

The political climate in Mexico since the 1960s also gives rise to concerns over the future stability of the government. The PRI, which has been the ruling party in

Mexico for nearly seventy years has controlled all of the gubernatorial offices, dominated the Mexican Congress by an overwhelming majority and retains its hold on the presidency at least until the year 2000.

The 1988 presidential election however showed a marked shift in Mexican politics. An opposition party candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, son of the famous Mexican Revolutionary General, Lazaro Cardenas, considered to be one of the founding fathers of modern Mexico, stood for election in opposition to Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the chosen candidate of the PRI¹².

Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, also a member of the PRI, after a failed attempt to reform the PRI from within, ran as the candidate of a coalition of mostly leftist minor parties. The initial results showed the voting to be going in favor of Cardenas. The election was saved for Salinas by a mysterious computer glitch which the government termed a "breakdown of the system". The election results were electronically manipulated and Salinas de Gortari was declared President¹³.

Public opinion favored Cardenas who, on the strength of his famous name alone, could have led sizeable segments of the population against Salinas and plunged Mexico into a

civil war. Instead, he withdrew from the PRI to start a new political party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which would compete in the 1994 elections¹⁴.

The 1994 election saw the PRI's chosen candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, assassinated with suspicion for the assassination cast upon the PRI itself as well as on President Salinas' brother Raul Salinas¹⁵. The party then chose Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon as its candidate. Distancing himself from the violence resulting from the ongoing leftist Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and advocating reform, Zedillo won the election with a plurality of 48.8 percent. The 1994 election, in a marked contrast to the 1988 election, was deemed by U.S. election observers and Mexican observers to have been relatively free of any meaningful election fraud. The most important factor was that for the first time in modern Mexico, the PRI did not receive a majority vote but a plurality in a three candidate electoral race.

The question that must be asked of the next presidential election to be held in the year 2000 is whether the PRI will in fact be willing to cede power and what effect the outcome will have on relations with the United States. Will

political instability result and will such instability have the by products of economic turmoil and further illegal migration across the border?

Economics: The economic stability of Mexico is another area of major concern to the United States. Issues such as the concentration of wealth in the hands of the politically connected few, and the effect of the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on the poorer segments of Mexican society, as well as agrarian reforms have been the key political-economic issues faced by Mexican governments over the last ten years.

Until recently Mexico has had a socialist economy with major industries including among others, petroleum, banking, communications, and agriculture being state owned. Being state owned these industries were in effect controlled by the PRI. In turn, state ownership deterred much needed foreign capital investment from Mexico. By 1990 Mexico's foreign debt had reached \$96 billion, with annual debt payments of \$10 billion¹⁶.

In an abrupt reversal of Mexico's socialist economic policy, President Salinas announced the privatization of key industries such as the sale of Mexico's 18 commercial banks

which had been nationalized in 1982, and Telmex, the country's telephone monopoly. At the same time, he announced his intention to negotiate and sign a free trade agreement with the United States¹⁷. Suspicions were that the former would obtain the state owned businesses at bargain prices.

Contrary to popular belief, these industries were not sold at bargain prices but were in fact sold at prices above their book value. The beneficiaries of the sales were of course those well placed friends and supporters of the President and the PRI. The incentive to pay over book prices for these businesses included long term monopoly protection and favorable government regulation along with the view that after NAFTA, these monopolies would be able to compete effectively with U.S. business and attract U.S. investment which would result in enormous profits¹⁸.

Salinas' privatization plan was viewed in the U.S. as the greatest turn-around in Mexico's economic policy since the 1910 Revolution¹⁹. As an end result, privatization further concentrated wealth in the hands of the very few with the disadvantaged elements of Mexican society once again becoming poorer.

Manifestation of the instability in the Mexican economy

most recently occurred in 1995. Economic collapse threatened default on foreign loans and was only averted by a different kind of intervention by the United States, a \$50 billion bailout package of loans and loan guarantees²⁰.

The 1995 near economic collapse was not the first such crisis. 1992 saw U.S. financial assistance to Mexico with the Brady Plan, named after Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, which restructured Mexico's massive foreign debt. Other financial crises have occurred periodically (1954, 1976, 1982, and 1987). As one commentator has written, "a continuation of the old system no matter how thinly disguised, was bound to fail: Mexico's economy depended heavily on foreign and domestic investors, who demanded the kind of stability that the country's aging political system could no longer provide"²¹. Economic instability can easily give rise to political instability which clearly will have an adverse effect upon the vital interests of the United States.

Insurrection: Economic instability and inequities in the concentration of wealth can often lead to armed insurrection. Such was the case in Mexico at the very end of 1993. In the early morning hours of January 1, 1994 armed guerrillas attacked and captured several towns in the

southern Mexican state of Chiapas²².

Chiapas was mainly inhabited by Mayan Indians who have been the victims of the economic disparity in Mexican society. By contrast, the state of Chiapas is one of Mexico's richest states in natural resources but its population is among the poorest. It is one of the main producers of hydro electricity, natural gas, oil, lumber, coffee, and beef. However, the bulk of its population lacks basic services such as electricity and access to drinking water ²³.

The insurgents, calling themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army, after the Revolutionary hero Zapata engaged in the armed uprising. The stated purpose of this insurrection was to address the problems of land rights, the redistribution of wealth and an overthrow of the "Mexican dictatorship". The insurrection in Chiapas has since died down but is still active and remains an issue to be addressed by the Mexican government. The issue of promised land reform and basic government services to the poor as well as the presence of armed revolutionaries in Chiapas still exist²⁴.

Illegal Immigration: Potential political instability, economic instability, and violence resulting from drug

trafficking activities, are often manifested by a population shift. In the case of Mexico, illegal immigration into the U.S. is the result.

Illegal immigration has been an issue which has constantly plagued the Southwest border. Mexico has been the route into the U.S. for not only Mexican Nationals but, as in the 1980s, for the populations fleeing the violence in Central America. The drain on economic resources of major urban centers in the Southwest U.S. has lead to the enactment of both State and Federal laws designed to limit accessibility to government benefits and services by illegal migrants as well as efforts to curtail the ability of illegal migrants to accept employment in the United States²⁵. Immigration issues trigger emotional debates on both sides of the border. Increased efforts by the U.S. to secure the Southwest border are often criticized as being inefficient on one hand or to stringent on the other.

The simple fact is that several southwest States were formerly part of Mexico and that in most of these states Mexicans are the largest and fastest growing minority population segments²⁶. As this trend continues, a tremendous influence will be exerted on U.S. policy makers with regard

to our policies toward Mexico. Mexico which has fiercely guarded its citizenship rights appears to be headed toward a relaxation of its present concepts of dual citizenship. As of March, 1998 Mexico now allows expatriates living abroad to be considered Mexican Nationals. This concept would allow expatriates who have become citizens of another country (mainly the U.S.) to own property in Mexico, a right previously reserved to only Mexican citizens²⁷. It is predicted that these expatriates will be granted dual citizenship status before the year 2000 which will enable them to vote in the 2000 Mexican elections. If enacted, the huge mass of Mexican-Americans will have the ability to vote in elections in both countries. The political implications to the U.S. can be easily seen.

One of the basic tenets of a nation's sovereignty is ability to defend and control its borders. The U.S. agency charged with the responsibility for enforcement of U.S. immigration laws and controlling the borders is the Department of Justice through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). INS has been repeatedly criticized by Congress for its inefficiency, mismanagement, and inability to do its basic job. As of 1996 the

Immigration and Naturalization Service, estimates that there were approximately five (5) million illegal aliens residing in the United States²⁸.

Decisions by Mexicans to migrate illegally are based upon a multitude of factors including the perception of border control efforts, home country economic conditions, demand for labor in the United States, and the existence of social networks in the U.S. which can support the illegal entrant once in the United States²⁹. With a healthy U.S. economy, further disparity between rich and poor in Mexico, the existence of a large sympathetic population in the U.S. and questionable border control, illegal immigration is the choice of many.

What role can the U.S. military play, if any, in influencing these decision making factors? At present, U.S. law prohibits the military from an active role in what are termed police functions within the United States³⁰. Enforcement of U.S. Immigration laws falls within this category of civilian police functions. Direct military assistance to date has been limited to providing technological assistance in the form of electronic detection, observation and construction projects³¹. To do more would

require a change in the law. There are presently efforts in Congress to make such changes. One bill in particular seeks to authorize the Secretary of Defense to assign up to 10,000 Department of Defense personnel to assist the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Customs Service in performing their official duties, with the stated purpose of assisting in the prevention of the entry of terrorist's drug traffickers and illegal aliens, and the inspection of cargo, vehicles, and aircraft at U.S. ports of entry³². This proposed legislation seeks to give the Secretary of Defense authority to expand present military assistance to include the prevention of illegal aliens from entering the United States.

The goal of this legislation is an admirable one, but is this a proper mission for the Army in the light of shrinking force structure and budgets? Clearly the types of actions contemplated by this legislation fall within the category of Operations Other Than War. The last use of a large American military force on the Southwest border came in 1916 with the Punitive Expeditionary Force led by then Brigadier General Pershing and the subsequent incursion into Mexico.

The questions which must be asked include, among others,

the effect of the apparent militarization of our southwest border on relations with Mexico (10,000 military personnel may not seem a great number, but compare this to the total INS Border Patrol force of 6500 with approximately 6000 assigned to the southwest border)³³ and the additional increase in Optempo for military forces.

Should the Army, through either Active or Reserve Component forces, be charged with responsibility for augmenting, and in some cases performing the Border Patrol's mission? Assuming that appropriate legislation were enacted which would allow the Army to lawfully engage in this essentially civil, domestic law enforcement function, questions need to be asked about the wisdom of such an approach from both operational and budgetary stand points. A clear definition of the overall role which the Army can play as well as specific criteria for engagement must be established. If assistance takes the form of passive activities such as construction, surveillance measures, and transport, can these type functions be determined to have training value to the participating Army personnel? Can the same be said for actual patrolling of the border? If so, at what cost, in both a monetary and an operational preparedness

sense?

The border with Mexico is an appealing avenue for not only illegal immigrants but also for the introduction of drugs into the U.S. as well as for the possible infiltration of foreign terrorists bent on delivering Weapons of Mass Destruction. The prime responsibility for dealing with these type of threats to the internal security of the U.S. falls upon the Justice Department through the Federal Bureau of Investigation³⁴. However, the Department of Defense has a substantial role in providing support to the FBI. Of the nearly \$7 billion spent for key agencies' unclassified terrorism -related programs and activities, nearly \$3.7 billion were spent by the Department of Defense³⁵. The primary support provided by the Defense Department at this time involves air transportation to return terrorists from overseas locations, the deployment of FBI personnel, and equipment for special events or for the investigation of terrorist incidents³⁶. The proposed Legislation mentioned above seeks to broaden the involvement of the Department of Defense in the border security role.

In spite of nearly a 100% increase in the number of U.S. Border Patrol Agents from 1993 to 1997³⁷ and the increased

support provided by various government agencies such as the Department of Defense, the Southwest border appears to be as penetrable as ever. Immigration and Naturalization Service statistics show that the number of illegal aliens in the U.S. rose from 3.9 million in 1992 to 5 million in 1996³⁸.

Drug Trafficking: Probably one of the most dangerous trends taking place in Mexico is the emergence and strengthening of drug organizations operating in towns and cities along the U.S.-Mexican border. The violence and corruption brought about by the drug trade have spilled over to population centers on both side of the border, creating unique challenges to law enforcement authorities in both the U.S. and Mexico. Law enforcement agencies have been compromised and civilian casualties are increasingly more common³⁹.

The additional problem of drug trafficking has turned some border towns into what one reporter has likened to the wild west⁴⁰. The corruption attendant to drug trafficking along the border has resulted in violence and death. Incidents of drug related gang wars have swept through towns on both sides of the border leaving scores of civilian casualties.

The statistics are alarming and the violence shocking, but does the solution to border security rest with the Army? One can argue that U.S. soldiers can easily be trained and equipped to enforce border control with the additional benefit of decreasing the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S. and preventing the infiltration of WMD across the border. If the Army is to be given a border security mission, should that mission be part of the now developing Homeland Defense mission of the National Guard?

Conclusion: Political and/or economic instability in a country has often been the catalyst for population shifts. With regard to Mexico, these same factors historically have lead to the movement of large numbers of people illegally across the U.S.-Mexico border. As an example, during the Mexican Revolution, approximately one fourth of the population moved into the southwestern United States. Should we expect that a future upheaval in Mexico would have any different result? The question would then become, what would our response be?

Should such a population shift take place, how would it be dealt with? Prior experience with mass migrations in the Western Hemisphere have indicated that our national response

was not adequate. From the 1970's through the 1990's we have seen "refugees" from Haiti and Cuba land by the thousands on the Florida Coast. Others attempting to flee Cuba and Haiti have been interdicted on the open sea, while others who avoided detection, landed and thereafter were disbursed over the eastern United States. Still others who landed were apprehended and were placed in detention facilities giving rise to public outcry and the enactment of special amendments to our basic immigration laws which eventually allowed these "refugees" to remain⁴¹. Would our response to a massive population shift from Mexico be any different? With the possibility of a large segment of Mexican-Americans becoming eligible voters in the southwestern states comes the political power to exercise influence over the U.S. policy and practices in dealing with illegal immigrants, especially from Mexico. One can be certain that there would be a major negative reaction from the Mexican-American population against the detention of thousands of Mexican nationals who might be forced to leave Mexico because of political unrest and economic dislocation.

As we have learned from our experience with the Mariel Boat Lift, criminals can be, and often are included in the

mix of people. Why would we not think that a mass migration from Mexico would not be used as a cover for the movement of both criminal and terrorist elements from Mexico to the United States. This is not only highly conceivable, but is more than likely.

A country with potential political crisis looming just over the horizon, an armed revolt yet an unresolved, repeated financial collapses, increased power of criminal organizations, and the source of major illegal immigration in the U.S. sits on our southern border.

With instability at our door step it would be more than prudent to prepare for contingencies that would have a significant impact on our way of life. A country with political instability, major drug trafficking cartels, official corruption, and festering insurgency, which can be an avenue for terrorist entry into the U.S., present ample reasons to develop plans to take such action as is necessary in order to secure the southwest border.

Lessons can be learned from experiences gained from other failed states. Similarities can be drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. The situation in Mexico may not be dissimilar. A long time

ruling party collages, the economy becomes unstable, criminal elements gain power and refugees flee the chaos. The case of Mexico can present a set of similar problems which can be as far reaching. The U.S. will not be dealing with a failed state who was an advisory, but one which is one of our largest world-wide trading partners and one whose nationals make up the fastest growing minority population within the United States, a minority which is gaining in political strength. Mexico must be understood by the U.S. military establishment as a potential area which may pose unique asymmetrical threats to our national security in the no so distant future.

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