# Abstract (Maximum 200 Words)
The United States is faced with a growing national security threat along its southern border with Mexico. Mexican drug cartels are waging a violent war among themselves and more importantly with the Mexican government. The violence and activities of these drug cartels has begun to spill over the border into the United States but more importantly to the national security of the United States is the reality of the security and political situation in Mexico. Powerful drug cartels are successfully waging war against the government and carving out territory or turf over which they literally rule and serve as the de facto government. These drug cartels derive their power from the vast sums of money, which they make from selling drugs in America. Without this money, these cartels would be mere drug gangs and nothing more than a problem for local police forces. In order to solve this problem the United States must do its part to take away the center of gravity of the drug cartels. By securing its southern border the United States can interdict enough of the drug flow to deny the cartels the financial resources they need to weaken the Mexican state.

# Subject Terms (Keywords on Which to Perform Search)
- Border Security
- Mexico
- Drug Cartels

# Limitation of Abstract
- Unclassified

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<td>STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER</td>
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<td>MAJOR P.C. MERIDA, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS</td>
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FUTURE WAR PAPER

TITLE:
A Real Clear and Present Danger:  
A U.S. Response to the War in Mexico

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

AUTHOR:  
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AY 2010-11

Mentor: Gordon Rudd, Ph.D.

Approved: ______________________

Date: 24 May 2011
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REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Introduction

"A nation is only as strong as its borders."

Mexican crime cartels are waging a violent, bloody, and successful battle against the Mexican government. These cartels control the U.S. illegal drug trade and are deeply involved in human trafficking of illegal aliens (quite possibly to include foreign terrorists) into the United States. The money the cartels receive from the U.S. drug trade has allowed them to recruit and equip powerful para-military armies as well as buy influence and corrupt Mexican government, judicial and law enforcement officials. Cartel influence is also spreading across the border through corruption of U.S. officials as well connections to U.S. based drug gangs like MS-13. The cartels are currently destabilizing Mexico and existing as parallel states within the Mexican state. Furthermore, the violence they inspire and cause kills thousands of Mexicans immediately across the U.S-Mexican border and the spill over into the Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California continues to grow toward uncontrollable levels. Possible solutions to this growing problem abound. Recommendations ranging from U.S. nation building efforts in Mexico to legalizing drugs inside the United States have received considerable thought and been the subject of numerous papers and studies. This paper will posit that the best way to solve this problem is to use the United States military to secure the U.S.-Mexican border in order to deny the Mexican drug cartels access to U.S. drug markets and American drug money, which their power derives from.
Context: The Threat

"Mexico’s cartels have surpassed their infamous Columbian antecedents. They have evolved into third phase cartels, criminal states that can pose a strategic threat to the nation state."²

The Mexican crime cartels control the illicit drug trade that moves illegal drugs into the United States. The drug trade earns the cartels approximately 30 billion U.S. dollars per year and with that money, the cartels have been able to corrupt the Mexican government, law enforcement and judicial systems.³ Additionally, the money that they make from the U.S. drug trade has allowed the cartels to recruit and equip brutal, well-trained private armies and hit squads that operate against other cartels and the government. These cartels, of which there are seven major ones, battle with the government for control of their turf and in recent years the cartels are winning that fight. This results in an absence of government presence through which the cartels fill the void and take measures to win over the local people in the areas that they control.⁴
Context: The Impact on Mexico

"Mexico is not confronting dangerous criminality – it is fighting for survival against narco-terrorism."5

The Mexican government’s inability to win this war against the cartels and the rising power and influence of the cartels has contributed to the further weakening of the Mexican state. The Mexican government’s credibility among the Mexican people continues to suffer especially in areas where the popularity of the Mexican government was low to begin with. Increased power and influence of the cartels will manifest itself in the election process, which the cartels seek to influence and within the Mexican government where the cartels aim to corrupt and bribe officials.

Furthermore, if the Mexican state continues to weaken and if the power of the cartels continues to grow what will surely exist in Mexico is one or more parallel states controlled by the cartels. These parallel states will cover the turf of the cartels and will essentially allow the cartels to operate without fear of governmental interference and allowing the cartels to enjoy some legitimacy or sympathy among the Mexican people.

Two additional possibilities exist if the cartels succeed. First, the growing power of the drug cartels could continue to grow and further weakening the Mexican state until the Mexican state collapses. Second, what could occur in an effort to avoid failing or further weakening of the state of Mexico is an agreement between the Mexican government and the cartels. This would return Mexico and the drug trade back to the relationship that existed for most of the 20th century.6 This latter course of action would actually be better for the United States because it would mean that the Mexican state had a semi-handle on the situation within its borders.
Unfortunately, this course of action is currently the most unlikely since the Mexican government is not in any position to impose its will on the cartels.

**Context: The Impact on the United States**

"Not since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 has violence in Mexico presented such a worrisome challenge to U.S. security."

Predicting the social, economic, security and political fallout from a failed state across our southern border is not a simple proposition. The United States would be hard pressed to deal with the ramifications of such a situation as the U.S. economy would take a huge hit and the already over taxed social and law enforcement resources would be further strained. Making matters even more serious the United States could find itself dealing with a humanitarian crisis, which could lead to a nation-building mission.

Fortunately, a failed Mexican state is not an immediate concern. What is most likely is a continuing deterioration of the situation in Mexico with increasing spill over into the United States. Cartels operating in a weakened Mexico will have the ability to conduct business at will and the United States will lack a real partner to combat this common enemy.

The United States will experience an increased connection between Mexican cartels and U.S. based drug gangs like MS-13. Powerful gangs like MS-13, which already present a serious challenge to U.S. law enforcement agencies, will transition to “third class” gangs, which challenge authorities over territory and control turf and exercise legitimacy over the people that live on their turf.

Perhaps more alarming will be the increased corruption of U.S. government officials. This is already an issue among the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, which have experienced an
increase in corruption cases over the last decade. Cartel drug money will continue to corrupt
government and law enforcement officials on both sides of the border.\(^9\)

Increased cartel operations on U.S. territory could result in increased violence against
U.S. citizens. The U.S. states along the border are already experiencing an elevated level of
violence due to Mexican drug cartels and their U.S. street gang allies. Territory along the U.S. –
Mexican border is becoming extremely violent and increasingly difficult for the United States
government to control. It is quite likely that if the levels of violence along the border continue to
increase that the United States government will essentially lose control or sovereignty over
portions of its territory along the border with Mexico.

**Solution: The Indirect Approach**

"Isolating Mexico's cartel insurgents from their enormous American revenue base — a crucial
step in a counterinsurgency campaign — may require a much more severe border
crackdown..."\(^9\)

The United States government does realize that a threat or problem exists south of the
border. The Bush administration identified the seriousness of the problem and made an
unprecedented effort to help the Mexican government through the Merida Initiative. The Merida
Initiative, begun in 2007, threw an enormous amount of money at the problem over the last three
years. According to Hal Brands, "the central aim of the Merida Initiative is to use U.S. money,
training, and equipment to strengthen Mexico’s military and law enforcement agencies, thereby
giving them the capacity to take and hold the initiative in the fight against the cartels."\(^11\) With
added U.S. assistance, the Mexican government tried to combat the power of the drug cartels but
without denying the cartels their center of gravity or source of strength the fight did not produce
many positive results.
The common factor with drugs moving north and money moving south is the U.S.-Mexico border. Securing the border does two things: one, it prevents the drug cartels from moving drugs as well as illegal aliens north and two it denies the cartels American money and guns from moving south. Securing the border essentially takes away the cartel’s center of gravity for without American drug money the cartels lose the ability to recruit and equip their large and brutal para-military private armies, or corrupt the Mexican government. The capabilities that the cartels lose when denied their center of gravity are what allows them to weaken the Mexican government. Lastly, if the cartels are unable to weaken the Mexican government then the result is a stronger Mexico, which is more desirable for the United States as well.

By securing its border with Mexico the United States would essentially be taking an indirect approach to fighting the cartels and for many reasons a direct approach against the cartels would not be politically acceptable in the United States and Mexico. Having U.S. forces operating south of the border would be politically unacceptable to many in the United States and almost everybody in Mexico.

The U.S – Mexico border is 2,000 miles long. Four U.S. states (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California) share this border with Mexico. The border on the U.S. side is patrolled by the U.S Border Patrol, which has ground and air assets. The Border Patrol has approximately 17,000 agents working along the U.S. – Mexico border. In the last year, the Obama Administration detailed approximately 1,200 National Guardsmen to patrol the border although it is unclear exactly how those National Guardsmen were used or what impact they had.
If the United States military secures the border with Mexico it makes sense that the United States military (DoD) would be the governmental organization with command and control of the operation. This is an important issue since normally the Border Patrol, Customs and Immigration agencies fall under the Department of Homeland Security. What this paper recommends is that a military Joint Task Force (JTF) reporting to U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) serves as the command headquarters for this mission. While the JTF commander could be a 3-star general, the deputy JTF commander could be a civilian from the Department of Homeland Security. Civilian representation could augment military staff sections of the JTF and liaison officers would serve as the link between military organizations and civilian agencies. The JTF deputy commander from the DHS would be the link to coordination and tasking of DHS agencies. Below the JTF commander and the deputy would be the functional ground (JFLCC), air (JFACC) and maritime (JFMCC) force commanders as well a Law Enforcement Section run by a representative from the FBI who would coordinate with state and local law enforcement agencies in the border states.
Command Relationships

The bulk of ground forces would come from the United States Army. Although there currently is a small number of National Guardsmen working along the border, this paper recommends that active duty units carry out, in what will be a protracted mission. With the bulk of ground forces coming from the U.S. Army, the functional ground commander would be a general officer from the U.S. Army. Based on how U.S. Army forces are stationed in the United States the U.S. army’s III Corps based out of Fort Hood seems a logical choice. Two army divisions would serve under this corps HQ along the border. The logical choices are the 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Hood, Texas and the 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colorado. Also in close proximity although perhaps not task organized for such a mission would be the 1st Armored Division headquartered at Fort Bliss, Texas.
Depending on the estimated length of the mission, Army and DoD leadership will face the decision of whether to rotate units in support of the mission. Leaving units internal the 4th Infantry Div and 1st Cavalry Division along the border for an extended period would degrade their combat effectiveness but on the other hand, units replacing the original units would have to conduct pre-deployment training, which would detract from training for their primary tasks and missions. Also if Army units and headquarter units are to be rotated the DoD has the option of using Marines, especially those from I MEF in San Diego. The Marine Corps has numerous bases near the border and could command and control a portion of the mission as well as provide a ground-air-logistics task force to operate along the border.

Major U.S. Military Installations in the Border States

Existing military facilities in the border states could be used to administratively and logistically to support ground forces (as well as naval and air units). Bases like Fort Irwin, Camp Pendleton, Fort Huachuca, Fort Carson, Fort Hood, Fort Bliss and Marine Corps Air Station Yuma and Marine Corps Base 29 Palms are located in areas that could serve as command posts and logistics. Additionally, ground forces could establish forward operating bases along the border as required to support their execution of the mission. These Forward Operating Bases
would serve not just as observation posts but essentially “frontier forts” through which U.S ground forces could patrol for extended periods.

Of course, the Border Patrol already works along the border with Mexico so this plan would call for the Border Patrol to provide liaison officers and agents to accompany Army units carrying out their security mission along the border. More important is the command relationship between the Border Patrol and the military. The solution that makes the most sense is to have the Border Patrol fall under the III Corps (JFLCC). Although this would be a drastic change, it would help ensure unity of effort along the border.

This plan would require a critical look at what areas along the border Army units would occupy and what areas the Border Patrol would patrol. This paper recommends that the Border Patrol occupy and work areas of high traffic and that the Army patrol and secure areas of less traffic. This would also allow the Border Patrol and Customs agencies to conduct more detailed and thorough searches of people, vehicles and cargo going north and south across the border. It will also be necessary to expand most crossing points in order to maintain a flow of traffic and commerce but at the same time ensure drugs are not flowing north and money and weapons are not flowing south. Having army ground units fill this economy of force mission will allow, the Border Patrol, to focus on the most likely avenues of infiltration.

To make the job on the ground more manageable the Army and Border Patrol will also utilize passive security measures like border fencing. Border fences, like those already constructed, will exist in certain areas based on terrain and transportation networks on both sides of the border. The intent or purpose of border fencing would be to cut down on the amount of space where drugs could be transported across the border and funnel drug traffickers into areas
that are covered by observation. Manned and unmanned aviation assets will also assist ground forces in securing the border.

With ground-shipping routes interdicted, it is likely that an increase in drugs being transported by air. In fact, cartels are already using small aircraft and ultra light aircraft to smuggle drugs across the border. In the last year, the number of illegal flights suspected of transporting drugs from Mexico to the United States has doubled. A JFACC supported by a U.S Air Force staff will control U.S. military air from across the services as well as coordinate with civilian agencies such as the Border Patrol and the DEA. Additionally, the JFACC will need to coordinate actions and information with the FAA. Close coordination with ground forces and local law enforcement agencies will be necessary to meet possible smuggling aircraft when they land. Lastly, full use of unmanned aircraft will have to be coordinated with intelligence agencies and ground forces and deconflicted for air space purposes.

Fixed wing assets will be able to support from home station bases and rotary wing assets may be able to support from home station bases or expeditionary airfields built near the border. Rotary wing assets working in conjunction with ISR and ground forces will be able to interdict foot and veheicular movement across the border and provide U.S. forces with the ability to respond to indications that the illegal border crossings are occurring. Radar and manned/unmanned reconnaissance platforms will be able to track suspected illegal flights and track where they land or drop their loads. Ground forces will be alerted to respond or UAVs will track any loads that are picked up once on the ground.

With the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico on either side of Mexico, the United States will have to dedicate resources to covering sea routes of ingress into the United States.
NORTHCOM should designate a Navy Fleet HQ as the JFMCC and both the U.S. Navy and the U.S Coast Guard will be operating in U.S. and International waters. Navy vessels with Marines on board would stop, board and inspect ships in U.S waters and International Waters suspected of smuggling illegal drugs. The U.S. Navy will also be prepared to detect and interdict semi-submersible craft from entering the United States.

United States military forces will coordinate with Customs and the Department of Homeland Security to ensure U.S. ports along both the Pacific and Gulf Coast seaboard are prepared to handle the need to increase inspections. This will obviously require an increase of resources to enable the Customs Department to handle the expanded requirement for cargo inspections.

With the border and associated air and sea routes secure the Cartels will be isolated from the revenue base in America by which the Cartels draw their power. Without their center of gravity, the Cartels will not be able to weaken the Mexican government and a stronger Mexico will be able to contain the power and influence of the Cartels. An indirect approach by the United States towards the threat will directly assist our Mexican allies in dealing with an internal security threat. The benefit to the United States is that a secure southern border will translate into less violence, less drug cartel activity inside the United States and a stronger Mexico will have positive impact on illegal immigration.

Numerous obstacles exist, which could affect this solution. First, any plan that puts U.S. military forces on our southern border would be highly controversial here in the United States as well as in Mexico. This issue would be a highly charged political firestorm that would affect this proposed solution and at the very least effect the execution and details of the mission. The
mission would be scrutinized by the media as well as by opponents of the mission and the government and the military would have to develop a comprehensive strategic communications plan to explain the purpose of the mission as well as to highlight progress during execution.

If the United States is going to use the military (and especially) active duty units to secure the U.S-Mexico border the government will need to closely examine any legal constraints are currently in place that would preclude the above detailed concept of operations. Specifically the government will need to determine whether the proposed use of active duty forces on U.S. soil in this fashion is a violation of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which essentially prohibits active duty military units from acting in a law enforcement capacity within the United States. Although active duty military units served in this capacity before such as Los Angeles riots in 1992 and after Hurricane Katrina, the potential length of this operation and nature of this mission makes ensuring that all the legal ramifications are rectified.

Rules that allow military personnel to search and detain personnel suspected of transporting illegal drugs or breaking the law will be needed and rules of engagement that detail the use of deadly force by military personnel operating on U.S. soil will need to be developed and integrated into training prior to the mission commencing.

Finally, an operation of this scale and scope will be expensive and will compete with finite financial resources as well as limited military resources. With our country currently engaged in two overseas operations and with the Defense budget shrinking and the U.S. economy struggling, any new operation, especially one of this size, will face opposition based on costs. The fact that the operation could go on for quite some time will make it even less attractive.
Conclusion

"The effects of drug use in the United States and the potential for the economic and political destabilization of Mexico make counternarcotics an immensely significant national security issue."\(^{16}\)

The United States faces a growing national security threat on its southern border and even though the face of this threat is criminal and non-state in nature, the best, most appropriate solution is a military solution.

Based on recent examples of nation building, protracted conflict with ambiguous and shifting objectives and based on the political realities both in America and in Mexico the United States should take an indirect approach to defeating the Cartels. Only by denying the Cartels the vast sums of money that they obtain by selling drugs in the United States can the U.S. help Mexico turn the tide against the Cartels. Without American money, the Cartels lack the capabilities to corrupt the Mexican (and American) system as well as recruit and equip their own private armies. Without this money, the Cartels are just a drug gang — still dangerous but more a public nuisance and well within the capabilities of the Mexican government. Only the vast resources and extensive capabilities of the U.S. military working in conjunction with civilian agencies have the ability to deal with the complexity of this threat and even though the enemy is criminal in nature or appearance the threat that these cartels pose in one of national security and sovereignty rather than law and order.

To deny the Cartels the money that comes from the sales of drugs in America the United States needs to secure its border and control the shipping routes by ground, sea and air from Mexico into the United States. While a supply-side strategy is costly and would require tremendous effort by the United States government, the United States military could be used to secure the territory of the U.S. and protect the citizens of this country.
Notes


4 Sullivan and Elkus, 4.


6 Ibid, 2.


9 Hesterman, 42-43.

10 Robert Haddick, “This Week at War: If Mexico Is at War, Does America Have to Win It?” www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/09/10/this_week_at_war_if_mexico_is_at_war, (12 September 2010): 1, (accessed October 2010).

11 Brands, 2.


13 Hesterman, 43.


16 Brands, 45.
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A Real Clear and Present Danger:
A U.S. Response to the War in Mexico
Major Paul Merida

Problem and Thesis

Problem: Rise of "Parallel" states within Mexico (especially northern Mexico) pose a national security threat to the United States due to increasing levels of violence, lawlessness, rampant illegal crossings of border, free flow of drugs and guns, potential entry point for terrorists.
Complicating the problem:
- Border w/ Mexico is 2,000 miles long
- Columbian cartels no longer own the drug trafficking business (now Mexican cartels do)
- American drug problem fuels the cartels w/ money

Thesis: The U.S. should use the U.S. military to control the border with Mexico and deny Mexican drug cartels access to U.S. drug markets and the money by which the cartels derive their power from.
Context: How we got here

- Mexican history since 1917
  - One party rule for 70 years
  - Corruption / Weak System
  - Gentlemen's agreement between gov't and organized crime
  - Fox / Calderon and the Mexican gov't response 2006

- Plan Columbia and its effect
  - Fall of the Columbian Cartels (1990s)
  - Displacement of drug trafficking
  - Rise of the Mexican Cartels (Early 2000s)

Context: Current Situation

- Existence of Parallel States w/In Mexico
  - Drug Cartels transition from street gang to trans-national criminal organization
  - Drug money and its impact ($30 billion US dollars per year)
    - Ability to corrupt
    - Ability to arm / equip CIT challenge Mexican security forces
    - Ability to buy support of the people (or at least intimidate / Gov't does not have a monopoly on use of force in cartel territory)

- Weakening / corrupting of the Mexican state
  - Corruption to cross the border
  - Violence increasing to out of control levels right across the border
    - 30,000 killed in Mexico tied to drug war violence since 2006

- Illegal Immigration and its impact
  - Potential for terrorists entering the U.S.
  - Border Patrol / DHS overwhelmed
    - Increase in corruption cases
Context: Future Implications

- Further weakening of the Mexican state
  - Impact on trade
  - Impact on illegal immigration
  - Impact on violence within U.S. and Mexico
  - Could Mexico collapse?

- Spread of cartel influence within U.S.
  - Links to U.S. drug gangs already exist
  - Cartel hit teams already operating within U.S. cities
  - Drug money already corrupting Border Patrol / Customs
    (How much longer before local / state / national politics
    are impacted?)

- Continue point of entry for terrorists

Solution Layout

- Current approach
  - Merida (not Paul) Initiative

- Other alternatives
  - Demand side reduction
  -- Invasion / Targeted Ops (like the movie)

- Proposed solution
  - Control the border / Disrupt drug / money flow
Solution Layout

• Secure / Control the border
  - Indirect approach
  - Attacks enemy COGs (DHS)
  - Control border does the following:
    - Infiltration of drugs, money, people (illegal)
    - Take away the focus of strength (DHS) through which the criminal gets power
    - Prevents/Retards flow of drugs, money, people
    - Renders them as 'specific' action with their methods can be handled
    - Lessen evidence, more border results
    - Lowers the number of leaks
      - Investigating the scenario
      - Deception and/or law after
      - Dependent on border

Solution Layout: COMRELS

Diagram showing the flow of information and control between different DHS agencies.

Solution Layout: COMRELS

Diagram showing the flow of information and control between different DHS agencies.
Solution Layout: COMRELs

• JTF (air, ground, naval) supported by interagency effort
• Interdiction effort along the border to control movement both ways
  - Legal entry continues with restrictions
  - Ground forces patrol supported by manned/unmanned aircraft
• Supported by existing military installations and "Frontier Forts", OPs and border fencing
• Supported by existing military installations and "Frontier Forts", OPs and border fencing
• Improved inspection, detection and search TTPs enhanced with technology
• Combined with other instruments of national power

Solution Layout: CONOPS

• JTF (air, ground, naval) supported by interagency effort
• Interdiction effort along the border to control movement both ways
  - Legal entry continues with restrictions
  - Ground forces patrol supported by manned/unmanned aircraft
• Supported by existing military installations and "Frontier Forts", OPs and border fencing
• Improved inspection, detection and search TTPs enhanced with technology
• Combined with other instruments of national power

U.S. Military Installations in the Border States
Challenges / Implications / Risk

- Coordinating supporting efforts
  - Demand reduction, gun control, immigration reform
- Legal issues / Diplomatic obstacles
- Interagency coordination and unity of effort
- Strategic communications and public support
- Political issues with Mexico and internally
- Impact of operation on combat effectiveness of units involved
- Open ended commitment / Measuring progress

Who’s got questions?