

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Is Mexico the Next Colombia?

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Despite recent improvements in the overall security situation in Colombia, the Bush administration remains worried about that country. Washington's nightmare scenario is the emergence of a narco-trafficking state allied with extremist political elements and terrorist organizations. U.S. leaders are sufficiently concerned about that possibility that they are ready to continue America's extensive antinarcotics aid to Bogotá for several more years.

The fears about Colombia are not unfounded, but U.S. policymakers have a serious problem brewing much closer to home—in Mexico. The drug trade in Mexico has mushroomed in recent years. Five years ago, Thomas Constantine, then head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, told Congress that the power of Mexican drug traffickers had grown "virtually geometrically" over the previous five years and that corruption throughout the country was "unparalleled." Matters have grown substantially worse since his testimony.

Mexico is now a major source of heroin for the U.S. market as well as the principal transit and distribution point for

cocaine coming in from South America. People both inside and outside Mexico have begun to worry that the country may descend into the maelstrom of corruption and violence that has long plagued Colombia, the chief drug-source nation in the Western Hemisphere. Indeed, Mexicans now openly speak of the "Colombianization" of their country.

True, Mexico does not face a large-scale radical political insurgency like that afflicting Colombia. The absence of such an insurgency is an important difference because it means that there are no significant anti-American political forces that can exploit the illegal drug trade for revenues to fund their cause. Nevertheless, the similarities between the situations in Colombia and Mexico are greater than the differences, and Washington has been slow to react to that troubling reality.

In just the past few months, there have been several alarming developments. Rival drug gangs in numerous cities—especially cities along the border with the United States—are waging ferocious turf battles. Several of those struggles, including the one in and around the popular resort city of Cancun, have involved present or former police officers.

The worst situation exists in the border city of Nuevo Laredo. There, the level of violence—and the level of police corruption—reached the point in early June that Mexico's national government suspended that entire police force and sent in the federal police to patrol the streets. For President Vicente Fox's administration, the final straw came when Nuevo Laredo's new police chief was assassinated on June 8, just hours after his appointment.

Federal authorities proceeded to purge the city's police force. After being required to take polygraph exams, 305 of the 765 police officers were dismissed. Indeed, 41 of them were arrested for attacking the federal police when those units arrived in the city. The "new and improved" Nuevo Laredo police were put back on the streets in late July, wearing new uniforms with white shirts. The white color was chosen deliberately, according to Mexican federal authorities, to demonstrate that they were a trustworthy new entity. Those officials apparently were serious.

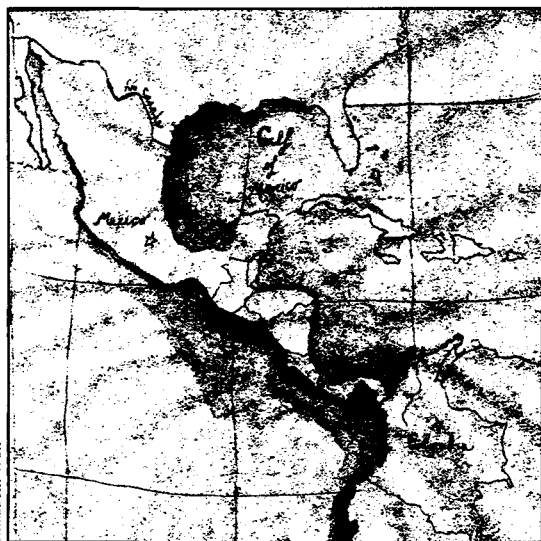
Aside from the considerable doubt that the purge of the local police would have any lasting benefit, the federal takeover of law enforcement had no meaningful impact on the extent of violence in Nuevo Laredo. Indeed, the number of drug-related killings actually went *up* during that period.

The fiasco with the Nuevo Laredo police is just one indication of the mounting corruption within Mexico's political and law-enforcement systems. Earlier this year, evidence came to light that some of the country's biggest drug kingpins were still running their organizations even while they were inmates in supposedly high-security prisons. The power of the drug organizations is generating fear throughout the country. There is even concern that ruthless drug gangs may have targeted Vicente Fox for assassination, and security around the president has been tightened.

All of this is familiar to those who have studied the impact of the drug trade on Colombia over the past two decades. Another Colombian pattern also is beginning to emerge in Mexico: the branching out of the drug gangs into kidnapping and other lucrative sources of revenue. That aspect has made Colombia the kidnapping capital of the world in recent years. Now, the same phenomenon is becoming noticeable in Mexico. Indeed, several American citizens traveling in Mexico have been victimized. That danger reached such an alarming level that the U.S. State Department issued a travel alert in January—much to the annoyance of the Mexican government.

It would be a tragedy if the corruption and violence that has plagued Colombia also engulfs Mexico. Such a development would automatically be of grave concern to the United States. Colombia is reasonably far away; Mexico is our next-door neighbor and a significant economic partner in the North America Free Trade Agreement. Chaos in that country would inevitably impact Americans—especially those living in the Southwest.

It should not come as a surprise, though, if Mexico is on the path to becoming the next Colombia. The trade in illegal drugs is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, with the United States as the principal retail market, and Mexico is a key player. Rival gangs are willing to do



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whatever is necessary to gain control of that trade.

U.S. policy seems to assume that, if the Mexican government can eliminate the top drug lords, their organizations will fall apart, thereby greatly reducing the flow of illegal drugs to the United States. Thus, U.S. officials have rejoiced at the willingness of President Vicente Fox's administration to make the capture of major drug-trafficking figures a high priority. But that is the same assumption that U.S. officials used with respect to the crackdown on the Medellin and Cali cartels in Colombia during the 1990's. Subsequent developments proved the assumption to be erroneous. The elimination of the Medellin and Cali cartels merely decentralized the Colombian drug trade. Instead of two large organizations controlling the trade, today some 300 much smaller, loosely organized groups do so.

The arrests and killings of numerous top drug lords in both Colombia and Mexico over the years have not had a meaningful impact on the quantity of drugs entering the United States. Cutting off one head of the drug-smuggling hydra merely results in more heads taking its place.

Mexico can still avoid going down the same tragic path as Colombia. Time, however, is growing short. Washington had better pay far more attention to the problem than it has to this point, and U.S. officials need to come up with better answers than the ineffectual and discredited policies of the past.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author or editor of 16 books on international affairs.

COMMONWEAL

A Different Past

by Troy Kickler

Sometimes historical scholarship tells us more about the present than about the past.

In June 2005, an exhibit of Omar ibn Said's *The Life*, the only known autobiography written by an American black while in bondage, was on display in the lobby of the U.N. headquarters. What made it even more significant was that *The Life* was written in Arabic and included chap-

ters of the Koran. The United Nations displayed the slave narrative—an unusual and noteworthy find, to be sure—not as an historical curiosity but as evidence that the “roots of Islam in America” run deep and that “Islam has created a major, positive impact in the United States.”

The discovery of *The Life* has been described as the “tip of the democratic iceberg.” Some scholars assert, for instance, that possibly 30 percent of all slaves were Muslims—although there is actual evidence for only a couple hundred. Others offer a more modest claim of ten percent. And the vast majority of this percentage, these scholars claim, were probably like Said: religiously devout, yet educated and broad-minded. He steadfastly adhered to Islam, the story goes, “throughout his long years, along with an openness towards other ‘God fearing’ people.”

Much about Said's life is left unsaid, however—probably because it complicates the simple and anachronistic presentation of a modern-day multiculturalism in the antebellum South.

Born in Futa Toro, a Fula state in what is now Senegal, Said had a privileged childhood. Although some speculate he was of royal pedigree, one thing is sure: Said was born into a wealthy family. The son of a slaveowner, who had approximately 70 slaves (according to Northern missionary reports), Said rarely performed manual labor. At the age of five, he lost his father to tribal warfare. Afterward, he was fortunate to live with an uncle, who enrolled him in schools. Embarking on a 25-year educational journey, he achieved not only literacy and numeracy but knowledge of the art of business negotiation.

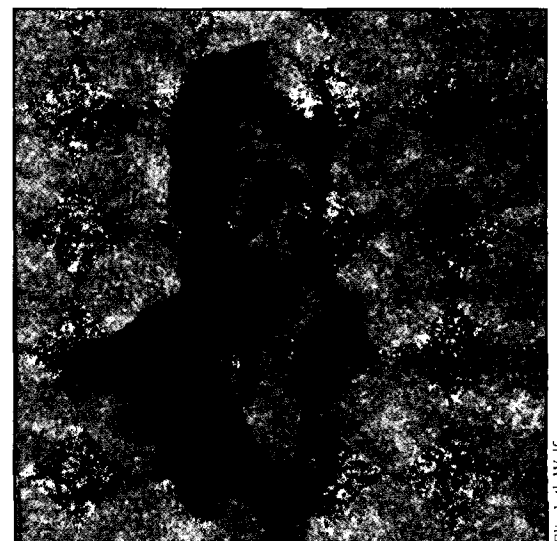
There is no question that, while in Africa, Said was a devout Muslim. In his teens and 20's, he waged “holy war against the infidels,” gave alms, prayed four or five times per day, regularly attended the local mosque, and even made a pilgrimage to Mecca. In 1807, one year before the U.S. Constitution abolished the importation of slaves, Said was captured by an invading army and shipped to Charleston, South Carolina.

There, he was sold first to a kind master, who died soon after acquiring him. His second master, recalled Said, was a “complete infidel, one who had no fear of God at all.” Slightly built and unaccustomed to manual labor, Said was beaten frequently for failing to fulfill daily work requirements. So, he ran away. Wandering through the Carolinas exhausted and no doubt bewildered by his circumstances, he

sneaked one night into a country church to pray, where he was spotted by a young boy. Shortly thereafter, he was captured by a slave patrol and then imprisoned in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

In jail, Said fascinated jailers by writing Arabic on the walls. Soon, people visited the jail to see his elegant handwriting. Eventually, Bob Mumford, the sheriff of Cumberland County, released Said from jail to meet with Mumford's brother-in-law, James Owen, a former state legislator who later served one term in Congress and was, for many years, a militia general and president of the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad. After obtaining Said's consent, Owen sought and obtained the legal right to purchase him from his cruel Charleston master, and Said lived out the remainder of his days in Bladen County, North Carolina.

For seven years while living with the Owens family, Said practiced Islam openly and dutifully. He observed Ramadan and read the Koran in Arabic; friends of the Owens had provided a copy. A spiritual man, Said listened curiously to the daily Bible readings of Jim Owen. In time, “Uncle Moreau” (the name many whites later gave him) expressed more interest in Christianity and even asked for an Arabic translation of the Bible. No doubt remembering his troubled past in America, Uncle Moreau often expressed his gratitude for the Owens' paternalism: “O ye people of North Carolina, O ye people of South Carolina, O ye people of America all of you,” asked Said in his autobiography, “have you among you any two such men as Jim and John Owen?” “These men are good men,” he continued. “What food they eat they give me to eat. As they clothe themselves they



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