

# AMERICA'S NEXT WAR

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, NOV 13 2011

The American public is tired of war. Soon there will be no US forces in Iraq and the scheduled drawdown of troops in Afghanistan is being accelerated. In both cases American field commanders objected to the withdrawals, hoping to preserve tenuously held gains in those conflicts by retaining on site American combat capabilities. President Obama, no more confident of the outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan than his commanders, choose to terminate negotiations for a status of forces agreement with the Iraqis and the faster withdrawals in Afghanistan because he is campaigning not for success in Iraq and Afghanistan, but rather for reelection at home. Some Republican candidates for president voiced objection to Obama's decisions though likely only because they were his. None of the Republicans seem to want the wars to be a big issue in the campaign, apparently recognizing there are many votes to lose both with their conservative base and with the overall electorate by being a champion of fighting counter-insurgency wars.

The American military also wants largely to get out of the wars, a terrible drain on them individually and likely destructive of the institution if continued given the partners and practices that counter-insurgency ventures involve. The armed services' main focus these days is on the post-war era which promises diminished budgets and uncertainty about their future missions. They expect significant budget reductions as a result of the deficit crisis which will surely target recent increases in defense spending for cuts, and the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which they believe will be driven by the obvious waning of public support. They understand that they cannot protect budgets with their current combat roles, and instead promote a move toward the Pacific built around a containment strategy for China and a return to technological solutions that were prevalent during the Cold War rather than manpower intensive ones a counter-insurgency doctrine requires.

But a counter-insurgency war lurks for America and it is nearby. Mexico with more than a two thousand mile border with the United States is sliding toward becoming a failed state.

More than 20,000 people have died there in struggles among drug gangs and with law enforcement since 2006. Local government has abandoned the fight in many parts of the country. Corruption and violence threaten the economic progress that has occurred in recent years. The market to the North has grown, but it includes an insatiable demand for drugs. Horrific crimes intimidate local authorities and law abiding citizens. With a persistent recession and increased border control, the escape to the North is a less available option for those who want to stay out of the drug fight. The pressure on the Mexican national government has grown, and with it the temptation to seek US military aid including the use of trainers, surveillance assets, and the sale of combat equipment. It is indeed happening.

It is not America's war yet, but a teetering Mexican state will draw close American attention. Spillover violence seems certain given the long border, the drug market, and the ethnic ties. As in the past, border violence will produce punitive actions which will not play well in Mexican politics where America is often portrayed as the villain. The American public may not want another nation building opportunity, especially one so hard on the heels of Iraq and Afghanistan, but instability in Mexico and/or reactions against US interventions to protect border communities will stir strong demands for greater involvement that will bear close resemblance to counter-insurgency and nation building. The American military is turning toward the Pacific when its future may lie south of the border.

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### **About the author:**

**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.