

Review - Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes

Written by James Phelps

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JAMES PHELPS, SEP 16 2013

Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes: Strategic, Operational, and Tactical
Edited by: Robert J. Bunker
Bloomington, IL: iUniverse, 2013

Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes is a collection of twenty-three Small Wars Journal (SWJ) articles supplemented by operational and tactical notes covering a variety of cartel-related subjects. With a preface by Major General (ret) Robert Scales and foreword by Texas Agricultural Commissioner Todd Staples, this volume, edited by Robert J. Bunker, collates much of the extant material and analysis available on the Mexican drug cartels published in the *El Centro* section of the SWJ between 27 May 2011 and 30 November 2012. *Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes* follows an initial anthology, *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (May 2012). It paints a consolidated picture of the effects cartels have on governments and social constructs. The influence of cartels on all aspects of Mexican life, and their ever-expanding influence on life in the Border States and deeper into the U.S. is frightening when viewed in context and within a single volume.

Dr. Bunker's innovative approach and selected content reflect deep concern with the growing threat posed by cartels in light of the U.S.'s failure to provide secure borders for its citizens and states. Through the volume's consolidation of

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the works of thirty-two contributing authors, the perspectives and analyses of the cartel problem therein are wide ranging, covering various issues such as diversified income streams, cartel conflicts with U.S. law enforcement, human trafficking, and government corruption. Fundamental to such an approach is the desire to produce a centralized source of information that can be utilized by multiple stakeholders: policy makers to inform decision making; academics to draw on for future research; and educators to inculcate the long-standing Mexican cartel problem into discussions on the realities of transnational crime, human and narcotics trafficking, and the spread of violence and corruption across international boundaries.

Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes is organized into three sections addressing the strategic, operational, and tactical concerns presented by the ongoing cartel wars in Mexico. The strategic analysis of what is happening with the cartels and the government in Mexico, and the overflow of conflict to Central America and the U.S. comprises the majority of this anthology. Bunker and his co-authors use comparisons of the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran to Venezuela's assistance to and cooperation with cartels (63), and also to the Mexican cartels' influence on Guatemalan and Honduran social and government organizations (as will be explored shortly) (116, 184) to deftly illustrate the changing operational aspects associated with Mexican cartels. These approaches also demonstrate the changing world view of the cartels and the potential influence they exert on attempts to dismantle or limit their reach by Mexican and U.S. governments.

A common feature of the arguments presented by Bunker and his contributors is that the U.S. government distracts its citizenry with overseas conflict and inane political discussion while conveniently ignoring a major military conflict along its own borders. Reporting with official statistics of the deaths, beheadings, and refugee issues facing Mexico over the past several years, Bunker makes an excellent case for this argument with the presented articles and his operational, strategic and tactical notes. Bunker and his contributing authors also address the concern of spill over violence and criminal relationships from the ongoing drug wars in Mexico. Authors Salcedo-Albarán and Garay-Salamanca demonstrate the social influence created by La Familia's money laundering activities in Guatemala that involve the former President of the country, presidents of banks, and their social and financial connection to the cartels (77-81). Guatemala and Honduras are both experiencing cartel-on-cartel and cartel-on-government violence as Los Zetas and La Familia expand their areas of operations (xxiv, 82, 115). Geibel proposes that the heavy weapons discovered in Mexico are originating with military sources in Honduras (402). This issue is replicated in the U.S.; from torture and beheadings in Oklahoma (364) and Arizona (371), to cross border incursions in Texas (353), the book's tactical notes provide short, pointed discussions of ongoing events that indicate the level of spill over violence that is occurring north of the border.

The nature of these tactical notes does, however, tend to lend them to some sensationalism in their reporting, as well as to the occasional misattribution of specific events to cartels (335). Future anthologies may need to revise their approach towards the inclusion of such information, as it is not always reliable when initially published. Furthermore, while the authors' analyses of cartel tactics are extensive, drawing mainly upon published information coming out of Mexico, there is a clear dearth of information on anti-cartel operations. This is, of course, the result of the limited available intelligence on current and past operations conducted by the Mexican government and their U.S. advisors. The necessary secrecy essential to the success of such operations is readily recognized and accounted for by the authors. The other aspect of operational analysis is the highly dynamic situation in Mexico with the cartel-on-cartel, cartel-on-government, and government-on-cartel operations that occur daily throughout the state. It is challenging to keep up with such a dynamic and multifaceted process, even for those who are dedicated to doing so. The intellectual incorporation of such rapidly changing environments is difficult to impossible to achieve in a print volume.

Bunker's *Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes* finds real value in the consolidation of numerable articles into a single reference document. This anthological approach serves the researcher and the educator by reducing the need to search large volumes of publications for relevant information on the cartel problems faced by Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and the U.S. As Commissioner Staples notes in his foreword, "Texans know the insecure border can be fixed, but it will require a sustained effort. To do so, Washington must help: Secure our border; enforce existing law, Document all immigrants; Mandate country of origin application for U.S. citizenship; Reform failed visa system for guest workers and international day laborers; and Modernize legal ports of entry for the efficient flow of legitimate goods and services" (xxx). Bunker informs readers that such an effort by the U.S. government would be meaningless

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unless the issue of cartels in Mexico and the failure of the Mexican government to address corruption at all levels and provide a secure society for its citizens are also concurrently resolved.

Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes should be required reading by all politicians interested in border security, international relations, transnational crime, drug trafficking, and all academics teaching the same. There are few comparative documents available on Mexican cartels. Most other writings are either sensationalized novellas, first person accounts of individual experiences, or reports published by the narco-bloggers themselves. It is unfortunate to have to write this, but much of what is reported by U.S. and Mexican government sources is intentionally presented as misinformation intended to produce a biased political outcome. This makes *Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes* an important addition to the available resources on cartel issues.

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James Phelps is the developer of the *Border Security and Homeland Security* undergraduate and graduate degree programs at Angelo State University. The author of *What Happened to the Iraqi Police* (2010), he is also the lead author on the first textbook on *Border Security*, forthcoming from Carolina Academic Press (Fall 2013).