

Why Mexico Is Job One

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Once upon a time, Mexico was only an adjunct in the war on drugs, which Gen. Barry McCaffrey fought in his job as Bill Clinton's drug czar. The Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran used to see Latin America through the lens of Colombia, where he persuaded Clinton to initiate an aid program that helped topple the cartels. Now though, Mexico is ground zero—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was there in March to pledge American support—and McCaffrey has plenty of advice. He chatted with NEWSWEEK's Adam B. Kushner. Excerpts:

KUSHNER: So how bad is it?

MCCAFFREY: The good news about the administration in Mexico is that they're paying attention.

That's a departure.

Oh, yeah. You have the president personally addressing the issue and dispatching three cabinet officers—State, Homeland Security and attorney general—to engage. It hadn't happened in several years.

What's the bad news?

On both sides of the border, political authorities are tempted to be in denial of the scope of the problem. A senior Mexican official just said the crime rate in Mexico is lower than in New Orleans. That's preposterous! It implies that New Orleans has squads of police being abducted, tortured to death, decapitated. Some American mayors say the crime wave hasn't yet hit U.S. cities, which is errant nonsense. Phoenix has seen more than 300 home invasions. American citizens have disappeared crossing the border. On both sides of the border, you hear, "This is criminal-on-criminal mayhem." Since when is that exculpatory?

Is denial worse in municipalities than in Washington?

The worst denial is in Mexico. We had the mayor of Ciudad Juárez hiding out with his family in El Paso; the police chief resigned, his two predecessors having been murdered; in some of the small towns on the border, the entire police force has quit. The problem is getting worse.

And the solution?

Step one is engagement, and we're there. Step two is resources commensurate with the problem. We just sent 300 officers to the 2,000-mile border, where more than 100,000 cartel members roam. At the same time, we're deploying more than 17,000 military personnel to Afghanistan.

Is this a greater problem than Afghanistan?

What I'd say is that the dominant foreign-policy interests of the United States—in economics, in homeland security—are Canada and Mexico. If you don't engage those two countries seriously, you don't have a sense of what's important to the American people.

Will Mexico be a failed state?

That's a political red herring. It's true that things will get worse, but the administration is being very careful not to call it a failed state.

Don't they lack control of their territory?

Yes! I heard a senior Mexican say, "We haven't lost control of our territory." That's categorically not the case.

So then what constitutes a failed state?

There was a point in 2000 when one third of Colombia had no national police presence. That's not happening in Mexico, and I can't imagine a situation where a narcoguerrilla force could run the army out of town. On the other hand, in midday they hung a policeman's body on a bridge in Juárez, and the police couldn't cut it down until after dark.

What should Clinton's trip accomplish?

Their sensitivity to our public pronouncements is unbelievable, so they were thrilled when she said, "We're in this together, it's the same lifeboat." We have to be aware that they think we're imperialistic, arrogant and ignorant of the conditions there, all of which are true. This accomplishes step one: The Americans are listening to us.

Let's say you have all the resources you need for this fight. What's the strategy?

Any civilized nation puts together law enforcement to control its own frontiers in cooperation with its neighbors. We don't control our own frontiers in any way. There should be 45,000 people—not 18,000—on border patrol, and we need real and virtual fencing. The second thing is to provide resources, in deference to Mexican sovereignty, to support their internal efforts. I'm told there are eight ATF agents doing gun smuggling into Mexico—six here, two there. C'mon! There are 2,000 weapons per day going into Mexico.

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