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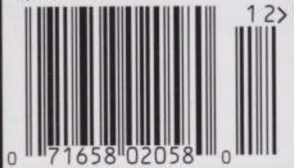

IN THE ALMOST THREE YEARS *since President Felipe Calderón launched a war on drug cartels, border towns in Mexico have turned into halls of mirrors where no one knows who is on which side or what chance remark could get you murdered. Some 14,000 people have been killed in that time—the worst carnage since the Mexican Revolution—and part of the country is effectively under martial law. Is this evidence of a creeping coup by the military? A war between drug cartels? Between the president and his opposition? Or just collateral damage from the (U.S.-supported) war on drugs? Nobody knows: Mexico is where facts, like people, simply disappear. The stakes for the U.S. are high, especially as the prospect of a failed state on our southern border begins to seem all too real.*

THE BORDER

By Philip Caputo

OF MADNESS

Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States.
—Porfirio Díaz, dictator of Mexico from 1876 to 1880 and 1884 to 1911

THOSE FAMOUS WORDS came to mind when another man named Díaz offered me an equally concise observation about the realities of life in the country today: "In Mexico it is dangerous to speak the truth. It is even dangerous to know the truth."

His full name is Fernando Díaz Santana. He hosts two AM-radio news-and-commentary shows in the small Chihuahuan city of Nuevo Casas Grandes. A stocky, broad-faced man in late middle age, he projects an air of warmth, openness, and intelligence. As he tells me that it's dangerous to speak or know the truth, the half-rueful, half-apologetic expression in his eyes makes it plain that he'd rather not keep his mouth shut and his mind closed.

He's received text messages from listeners cautioning him to be careful of what he says on the air. He takes these friendly warnings seriously; failure to heed them could bring a death sentence like the one meted out to Armando Rodríguez, a crime reporter murdered by an unidentified gunman in November 2008 in Juárez, the violent border city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. The fear of suffering a similar fate is a powerful incentive for self-censorship, for training a naturally inquisitive mind to acquire ignorance.

"So now we give just the objective facts," Díaz says as he sits facing me in a stuffy, windowless rear room of the radio station, in Nuevo Casas Grandes's central business district. He and the co-host of his afternoon show, David Andrew (pronounced Da-*veed* An-*dray*-oo), explain that the "objective facts" are those reported by the police or city hall or some other official source. Though the accuracy of such facts is often questionable, no questions dare be asked. "We say nothing more," Díaz adds. "As long as we don't get too deeply into a story, we are safe."

I am reminded of Winnie Verloc, the character in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* who "felt profoundly that things do not stand much looking into."

More than 14,000 people have been killed in the almost three years since President Felipe Calderón mobilized the army to fight Mexico's half-dozen major drug cartels. Virtually none of those homicides has been solved, partly because witnesses suffer short-term memory loss when questioned, and partly because the police, for various reasons, also feel profoundly that things do not stand much looking into.

JULIAN CARDONA

Rodríguez's death is illustrative. His colleagues believe he was killed for an article he wrote linking relatives of Patricia González, the Chihuahuan state attorney general, to narcotics trafficking.

That is not idle theorizing. Jorge Luis Aguirre, a writer for LaPolaka.com, an online Juárez news service, had written extensively about corruption in the Chihuahuan state government, and did not spare González either. On the night of November 13, 2008, as he was driving to Rodríguez's wake, he got a call on his cell phone. The male caller said, "You're next, son of a bitch!" and hung up.

Aguirre immediately packed up his wife and sons and fled to El Paso, where he sought asylum. In March, testifying at a hearing of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs, he stated that he'd identified the source of the threats:

"Victor Valencia, a representative of the governor of the state of Chihuahua, had sent people to warn me to 'tone down' my criticisms of the prosecutor, Patricia González, because if I didn't, he was going to kill me, using the Juárez cartel's preferred method of kidnapping followed by execution."

The aftermath reveals a lot about today's Mexico. Patricia González remains in her post. Victor Valencia has been promoted to chief of public security in Juárez. The federal deputy attorney general handling the Rodríguez murder case, Jesús Martín Huerta Yedra, was shot to death in his car, along with his secretary. The investigation has since gone nowhere, to no one's surprise. As the newspaper *El Diario* editorialized,

> Friends of the journalist, who preferred not to give their names for security reasons, mentioned that they do not feel frustrated by the lack of advances in the case since from the beginning, they felt that the authorities had no intention of doing anything to clarify the crime.

MORE ONLINE

Photographer Julián Cardona narrates a slideshow of images from Juárez's drug wars: theatlantic.com/juarez.

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TO *CLARIFY* THE CRIME. Of the many things Mexico lacks these days, clarity is near the top of the list. It is dangerous to know the truth. Finding it is frustrating. Statements by U.S. and Mexican government officials, repeated by a news media that prefers simple story lines, have fostered the impression in the United States that the conflict in Mexico is between Calderón's white hats and the crime syndicates' black hats. The reality is far more complicated, as suggested by this statistic: out of those 14,000 dead, fewer than 100 have been soldiers. Presumably, army casualties would be far higher if the war were as straightforward as it's often made out to be.

What, then, accounts for the carnage, the worst Mexico has suffered since the revolution, a century ago? To be sure, many of the dead have been cartel criminals. Some were killed in firefights with the army, others in battles between the cartels for control of smuggling routes, and still others in power struggles within the cartels. The toll includes more than 1,000 police officers, some of whom, according to Mexican press reports, were executed by soldiers for suspected links to drug traffickers. Conversely, a number of the fallen soldiers may have been killed by policemen moonlighting as cartel hit men, though that cannot be proved. Meanwhile, human-rights groups have accused the military of unleashing a reign of terror—carrying out forced disappearances, illegal detentions, acts of torture, and assassinations—not only to fight organized crime but also to suppress dissidents and other political troublemakers. What began as a war on drug trafficking has evolved into a low-intensity civil war with more than two sides and no white hats, only shades of black. The ordinary Mexican citizen—never sure who is on what side, or who is fighting whom and for what reason—retreats into a private world where he becomes willfully blind, deaf, and above all, dumb.

Which brings us back to Fernando Díaz and his avoidance of truth.

I have come to see him at the suggestion of Emilio Gutiérrez, who fled to the U.S. because army officers threatened him with death. During an interview at his hiding place north of the border, Gutiérrez told me about a mysterious event that occurred on February 12, 2008. Teams of gunmen, riding in SUVs and pickup trucks and described by witnesses as "dressed like soldiers," swept through Nuevo Casas Grandes and six neighboring communities between midnight and dawn, kidnapping and executing people.

The convoys covered 170 miles altogether, rolling through military checkpoints unimpeded. In Nuevo Casas Grandes, the "armed commandos," as they were called by the Mexican media, set fire to the house of a police subcommander and shot him to death as he ran outside. Two other people, one of them the uncle of a midlevel narcotics trafficker, were also executed. The press reported that 14 more were abducted, but the actual number was believed to be much higher. All the victims, except two who were apparently snatched by mistake and later released, vanished without a trace.

Gutiérrez, a reporter in *El Diario*'s Ascensión bureau, covered the operation. From what he'd seen with his own eyes and from interviews with eyewitnesses, he concluded that the perpetrators were dressed like soldiers for the simple reason that they *were* soldiers. An operation on that scale, he reasoned, could not have been conducted by gangs of pistoleros hastily thrown together: it required thorough planning, accurate intelligence, discipline, and coordination. Nor could pistoleros have driven through army roadblocks without being stopped. If the raid wasn't military, it must have been conducted with the army's cooperation.

That wasn't what Gutiérrez reported, however. He told me that his boss, José Martínez Valdéz, the editor of *El Diario*'s editions in northwest Chihuahua, instructed him to "not cause problems by writing that this was military." Gutiérrez's silence did not win him any points with the army. Five months later, he was warned that the military was going to kill him, and he was forced to leave the country.

But why, I asked, would soldiers maraud the countryside on a murder-and-kidnapping spree? He replied that the raid was not part of the Mexican government's war *on* the drug cartels but a struggle *between* two powerful cartels: the Juárez organization, headed by Vicente Carillo, and the Sinaloa federation, whose boss, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, is the most-wanted man in Mexico. Gutiérrez said that in

this instance the gunmen, whoever they were, had been after people they thought were working for the Juárez cartel.

"It's an open secret in Mexico," he said, "that the army is fighting the [Juárez] cartel to weaken them and pave the way for Guzmán."

OPEN SECRET OR NO, an allegation that soldiers may have acted on behalf of a drug lord needs to be substantiated. After all, Calderón's counter-narcotics strategy relies, with U.S. support, almost exclusively on the military.

With a short list of contacts provided by Gutiérrez, my interpreter, Molly Molloy, and I enter Mexico through the Palomas border crossing and head south into the Chihuahuan Desert. I have just been in Juárez and am relieved to not be going back to that industrialized border city—utterly charmless in the best of times, and these are far from the best of times. Juárez's main product now is the corpse. Last year, drug-related violence there claimed more than 1,600 lives, and the toll for the first nine months of this year soared beyond 1,800, and mounts daily. That makes Juárez, population 1.5 million, the most violent city in the world. Two lines of graffiti summed up a place where not only law and order but civilization itself has broken down: MI CIUDAD PIDE CLEMENCIA EN SU DEMENTIA ("My city asks for mercy in its madness"), and MI CIUDAD ES UN NEGRO LAMENTO UN AULLIDO INFINITO ("My city is a black lament, an eternal howl").

Nuevo Casas Grandes lies on a plateau near a fertile valley—cowboy-and-farmer country where cattle graze on the high desert ranges and apple and pecan orchards form tidy ranks on the city's outskirts. The city itself, with some 51,000 people, is known to archaeologically minded tourists for its proximity to Paquimé, the site of ancient pueblo ruins. It looks prosperous by the standards of interior Mexico, with wide streets, a few decent hotels and restaurants, an airport, and several auto dealerships selling Fords and Jeeps and other familiar makes. If it weren't for all the Mexican license plates, I could believe we were in a town in the southwestern United States.

Our first call is at the offices of *El Diario*, housed in a whitewashed villa on the main drag. Molloy and I are hoping to meet with José Martínez Valdéz, who is Gutiérrez's former editor, and the news director, Victor Valdovinos. They can answer some of our questions and provide introductions to city officials. But repeated attempts to see Martínez are unsuccessful—he manages to dodge us all afternoon. We do get a very brief audience with Valdovinos. When we tell him what we are there for, he flinches and says, "You don't want to talk to me," then vanishes.

That leaves Fernando Díaz, whom we find at the radio station as he and David Andrew wrap up their afternoon show. They are willing to talk to us, and we go into the back room. Andrew, a heavyset, 30-ish man with dense carbon-black hair, shuts the door, either to muffle the noise from outside or to make sure no one overhears our conversation.

In the Mexico Mexicans have to live in, Díaz begins, life is "very hard, very bad," a statement he underscores with a statistic: last year, 115 homicides were committed in Nuevo Casas Grandes and its surrounding communities. That works out to a murder rate more than 20 times as high as New York City's.

It's at this juncture that he makes his comment about the dangers of speaking or knowing the truth. I begin inquiring about the February 2008 incident, but Díaz and his younger colleague aren't eager to discuss it.

I don't get anywhere, though Díaz casts doubt on Gutiérrez's assertion that the raid was a military operation. All of this talk about human-rights abuses by the army is "a myth," Díaz insists. He is in fact cheered that an army battalion has been making rounds to bolster security in Nuevo Casas Grandes: "We are abandoned and unprotected here in northwest Chihuahua. It is a very big wish that the soldiers will bring peace. The army is the only group we can trust." He adds by way of illustration that several *sicarios*, as professional assassins are called in Mexico, were arrested and confessed to killing 19 people in town.

THE ORDINARY MEXICAN CITIZEN—NEVER SURE WHO IS ON WHAT SIDE, OR WHO IS FIGHTING WHOM AND FOR WHAT REASON—RETREATS INTO A PRIVATE WORLD WHERE HE BECOMES WILLFULLY BLIND, DEAF, AND ABOVE ALL, DUMB.

Two of the *sicarios*, Andrew interjects, were his neighbors: "One guy worked in a car wash, the other guy was an army deserter." Two others turned out to be auto salesmen—"nice guys in the day, killers by night," Díaz says, as if he's voicing over a trailer for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. "You are talking to me, a radio announcer, but you can't be sure that I'm not a *sicario*," Díaz adds. "You say you're an American reporter, but I don't know that you're not a *sicario*. You cannot trust anybody." He doesn't seem to notice that he's contradicted his earlier remark that only the army can be trusted.

The question is, can the army be trusted, and if so, can it win this latest—and biggest—battle in the seemingly endless "war on drugs"? Calderón has deployed more than 45,000 troops (out of a total force of 230,000) throughout the country. Of that number, about 7,000, reinforced by 2,300 federal policemen, occupy Juárez as part of Operación Conjunta Chihuahua—the Joint Chihuahuan Operation. The army has taken over all the policing functions. The city is under undeclared martial law.

Although many ordinary Mexicans welcome the army's intervention, certain that things would be far worse without it, approval has been far from universal. Claims of grievous abuses by the armed forces—unlawful detentions, disappearances, thefts, rapes, and murders—have increased sixfold in the past three years, according to Human Rights Watch. One hundred and seventy complaints have been filed in Chihuahua alone, says Gustavo de la Rosa, the former Chihuahua state ombudsman for Mexico's National Human Rights Commission.

Leaving aside the question of whether militarizing the anti-narcotics campaign is the best way to go about things (a

similar strategy in Colombia has been only partially successful), the fact is that, by destroying public trust in the armed forces, military misconduct undermines the entire effort, as I learned from a 50-year-old cleaning woman who now lives in Arizona and who asked to remain anonymous. She was visiting her aunt in Juárez last December when soldiers broke into a neighbor's house, claiming that they were looking for a suspect.

"They didn't say who," the woman told me. "They tore her house apart, took her jewelry and her money, and said that if she complained about what they did they were going to come back and kill her. People are more afraid of the police and soldiers than they are of the narcos, because they're very mean guys—not all, but many."

The fear goes beyond undisciplined soldiers running amok. In an interview, de la Rosa told me that the president, elected in 2006 by a margin as thin as an ATM card, called out the army not merely to fight the cartels and eliminate a threat to national sovereignty but to consolidate his power and confer legitimacy on his presidency. "Calderón wants to show the Congress that the military is with him," de la Rosa said. "And the military promised to support Calderón in exchange for being allowed out of the barracks, because the army wants to govern. Chihuahua is an experiment. What is happening here is in essence a military coup, a regional coup." To support this contention, he cited a change he has had to make in his own work. Under normal circumstances, he would file complaints of abuse with the state governor, but now, he said, "the governor is ineffective, so I have to go to General Felipe de Jesús Espitia, the *comandante* of the 5th Military District."

I was somewhat incredulous that the military was staging a creeping coup. To what end? I asked.

De la Rosa shrugged. "Actually, nobody really knows or understands what the military is up to," he answered, hedging a bit. Then he asserted that the army intends not to stamp out drug trafficking but to "control" it. "So now if a drug cartel wants to move drugs into the U.S., who would they go to? To the governor? No, to the general." (*El Universal*, Mexico's largest newspaper, reported in September that de la Rosa had received death threats from the army, apparently because of his sharp criticisms; sources have told me he has taken temporary refuge in the U.S.)

As de la Rosa suggested, there is a dismal history of collusion between the armed forces and organized crime. In the late 1980s, the Mexican defense secretary was caught peddling protection to three drug organizations, which paid him a total of $10 million. In 1997, Mexico's chief anti-narcotics officer was indicted for providing the Juárez cartel with classified drug-enforcement information in exchange for millions of dollars in bribes. In a 2001 essay in the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, a University of Texas criminologist, Patrick O'Day, cited several instances of Mexican soldiers' guarding narcotics shipments and transporting them into the United States in military vehicles or by other means. These operations were so extensive and went on for so long that O'Day concluded that the army was a cartel unto itself.

BUT LET US MAKE the risky assumption that today's army is no longer involved in drug trafficking. The belief that it is exploiting a weak government to advance agendas beyond its declared mission is widespread, and not without reason. While many of the crimes alleged to have been committed by the armed forces appear to be the random acts of rogue troops, others may be part of a directed campaign with three possible objectives.

One objective is laudable—to get information about drug trafficking. The problem is that, in de la Rosa's words, "the army's investigative techniques are kidnapping and torture." But according to Cipriana Jurado, a veteran labor organizer and women's-rights activist, the military has another purpose: trying to stifle dissent, she said, citing numerous arrests of political troublemakers. And, as Gutiérrez's case indicates, the generals also may be seeking to clamp down on Mexico's freewheeling press.

In seeking, much less speaking, the truth about what the army is up to, one often runs into the paradox of the Mexican reality: something dreadful happens and is then treated as if it hadn't happened. Facts, like people, simply disappear.

"YOU SAY YOU'RE AN AMERICAN REPORTER," DÍAZ TELLS ME, "BUT I DON'T KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT A *SICARIO*"— A PROFESSIONAL ASSASSIN. "YOU CANNOT TRUST ANYBODY."

I experience this myself as I tour the ruins of a Juárez drug-rehabilitation center with my friend Julián Cardona, a photographer and Reuters correspondent. The rehab clinic is in a shabby two-story building on an unpaved street lined with cinder-block hovels, old cars, and derelict buses. A wind-whipped urban grit that feels dirtier than desert dust pelts our faces as we enter the rectangular patio strewn with rubble, its walls gouged by bullet holes. Small rooms lead off the patio, each with a hand-painted phrase above its door—COCINA for kitchen, SALA DE JUNTAS for meeting room, D-TOX, which needs no translation.

We enter the meeting room. Votive candles gutter in glass jars arranged around an image of Jesus Christ propped up in one corner. The walls are peppered with bullet holes and spattered with dried blood. Cardona tells me what happened here on a Wednesday evening, August 13, 2008, as an Assembly of God pastor named Socorro García and her deacon, Joel Valle, conducted a service for the patients. After they and about 20 addicts gathered in the meeting room to sing hymns and hold a prayer service, García took the podium for altar call. "Is there anyone here who was a Christian in the past," she asked, "but who fell away into drugs and who would like to reconcile with God?" Several patients raised their hands. García summoned them.

Outside, a Ford pickup carrying a detachment of Mexican paratroopers was parked at an intersection no more than 50

yards away. Two other trucks pulled up in front of the rehab center. Eight men armed with assault rifles and 9-millimeter pistols and wearing bulletproof vests and ski masks piled out of the vehicles and rushed inside.

The shooting started in the patio, just as the patients were walking up to the podium in answer to García's call. Some flung themselves to the floor, others ran for their lives or huddled against a wall. García stood at the podium, crying out, "Muchachos! Ask God for another chance to live!" At that moment, four gunmen burst inside and, in her words, started "shooting in all directions."

García raised her hands and hollered above the gunshots, "Lord, send your angels to protect us!" A gunman looked at her through the eyeholes of his ski mask and she looked back. He stopped shooting. "I was right there in front of him," García told Cardona. "He had already shot a lot of people, and one more life would have meant nothing to him, but he didn't shoot. Why? Maybe God did not allow it."

Neighbors called the Emergency Response Center, the equivalent of 911, but got no response. Accounts of the actions taken by the soldiers parked at the street corner differ. According to one, the soldiers stood by passively as the assassins jumped in their trucks and fled. According to another, they drove past the rehab center at high speed while the massacre was going on. People shouted to them to put a stop to it, but the soldiers kept going. This led one of the neighbors to conclude that they "were guarding the killers or came with them so that the police would not intervene."

In all, nine people were killed and five wounded. Among the dead was Joel Valle, the deacon. It was the worst mass murder in Juárez in years, Cardona says as I gaze at the flickering votives, the bloodstains and bullet holes framing the picture of Christ.

Of course, I have questions: Were any of the killers identified or captured? No. Was their motive determined? No, although there were rumors that they were after members of a street gang, the Aztecas, said to be hiding in the facility. Were the soldiers involved in the massacre? That's what eyewitnesses claimed, Cardona replies. I keep grasping for facts, but realize it's futile. Cardona says, "This is the black hole of Mexico. You cannot see inside of it, and nothing gets out."

Despite the heavy military and police presence, six rehabilitation clinics have been attacked in Juárez over the past two years. The deadliest incident occurred on September 2, when 18 people were executed. Government authorities claimed the massacres were part of a war of extermination between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels.

THE CONDUCT OF THE Mexican military goes to the heart of U.S. counter-narcotics policy. In the past year, experts like General Barry McCaffrey (the drug czar in the Clinton administration) and political figures have warned that if the cartels are not contained, Mexico could become a failed state and the U.S. could find itself with an Afghanistan or a Pakistan on its southern border. Such forecasts are hyperbole, but the fact is that drug trafficking and its attendant corruption are a malignancy that has spread into Mexico's lymph system. To extend the metaphor, Calderón is attempting to perform radical surgery with the only instrument at his disposal—the army. It may be a tainted instrument, so the reasoning goes, but it is less tainted than the law-enforcement agencies.

Washington supports, indeed encourages, this approach through the Mérida Initiative, a security-cooperation agreement between the two countries that Congress passed and George W. Bush signed into law. Its aim is to provide $1.4 billion in funding, spread over several years, for military and law-enforcement training, equipment such as helicopters and surveillance aircraft, and judicial reforms. The aid package also includes conditions for improvements to Mexico's less-than-enviable record on human-rights issues. Fifteen percent of the funds can be withheld if Mexico fails to show progress on matters such as prosecuting human-rights violators and prohibiting the use of torture to obtain evidence and testimony.

And that is where U.S. policy becomes contradictory. It calls for a military solution to the trafficking problem. But there are very few, if any, civil safeguards on the actions of the Mexican military. Its soldiers are subject only to military law, even when deployed in their current crime-fighting capacity, and the country's military-justice system is, to understate things, opaque.

A good example is the case of Javier Rosales, a medical technician who died after he and a friend were captured and tortured by soldiers. Members of his family went to the state justice office and the federal attorney general's office to file a complaint against the soldiers and demand an investigation. They were turned away because, the officials said, charges of army misconduct fall under military jurisdiction. However, Enrique Torres, a spokesman for the Joint Chihuahuan Operation, told me that the army looks into such allegations only through internal investigations or when formal charges have been filed by state or federal prosecutors. It's pure catch-22: state or federal authorities will not receive complaints against soldiers, and the army will not investigate unless charges have been filed by state or federal authorities.

That is among the reasons why, out of the more than 2,000 complaints brought before Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, not one has resulted in the prosecution of a single soldier.

The provisions of the Mérida Initiative would appear to give the U.S. considerable leverage in compelling the Mexican army to act with more restraint and greater respect for the civil rights of the country's citizens. Financial leverage, that is. The moral authority of the U.S. has been eroded by accusations that it has employed torture and illegal detentions in the "war on terror," as well as by its status as the drug cartels' biggest market and its singularly unsuccessful efforts to dry up demand.

Every year, under the Foreign Assistance Act, the State Department is required to certify that its southern neighbor is fully cooperating in efforts to stem the export of illegal narcotics into the United States. Without certification, Mexico would be ineligible to receive the vast majority of American aid. But the U.S. government often soft-pedals criticisms of Mexico on matters such as corruption and human-rights offenses, for two reasons. One is U.S. sensitivity to the Mexican elite, which can be thin-skinned about what it regards as

GALLERY SOCAR Oil Fields #3, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006 *by Edward Burtynsky*

CHROMOGENIC COLOR PRINT. PHOTOGRAPH © EDWARD BURTYNSKY, COURTESY ADAMSON GALLERY, WASHINGTON, DC/HASTED HUNT KRAEUTLER, NEW YORK/NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY, TORONTO

SOCAR Oil Fields #3, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006: from the traveling exhibit *Edward Burtynsky: Oil* on display at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., through December 13

infringements from the north on its national sovereignty. The second is money. In the highly unlikely event that Mexico were decertified, the cutoff in U.S. aid would strain bilateral relations, trade agreements would be imperiled, and American businessmen would find it harder to operate south of the border. Also, of all the countries that export oil to the United States, Mexico, at 985,000 barrels a day, ranks third, behind Canada and Saudi Arabia.

That makes speaking the truth about Mexico politically and economically dangerous in official U.S. circles.

But a larger question arises. Even if tomorrow the Mexican military began waging its anti-narcotics campaign with the probity of, say, the Swiss Guard, could it overcome the power of cartels? The drug bosses and their organizations have become integrated into Mexican society, corrupting every aspect of the nation's life.

The U.S. government estimates that the cultivation and trafficking of illegal drugs directly employs 450,000 people in Mexico. Unknown numbers of people, possibly in the millions, are indirectly linked to the drug industry, which has revenues estimated to be as high as $25 billion a year, exceeded only by Mexico's annual income from manufacturing and oil exports. Dr. Edgardo Buscaglia, a law professor at the Autonomous Technological Institute in Mexico City and a senior legal and economic adviser to the UN and the World Bank, concluded in a recent report that 17 of Mexico's 31 states have become virtual narco-republics, where organized crime has infiltrated government, the courts, and the police so extensively that there is almost no way they can be cleaned up. The drug gangs have acquired a "military capacity" that enables them to confront the army on an almost equal footing.

"This in itself does not prove that we are in a situation of a failed state today," Buscaglia wrote. He seemed to be suggesting that the situation could change tomorrow—and not for the better. ■

Philip Caputo is the author of 14 books, including A Rumor of War, Acts of Faith, *and most recently,* Crossers, *a novel about life on the Mexican border.*