The Executioner's Men

Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created

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With the assistance of Lindsey C. Nicolai

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to the US law-enforcement community, and their Mexican allies, who are seeking to combat Los Zetas, the deadliest criminal organization based in the Americas. In addition, we will be forever in debt to our long-suffering loved ones without whose sacrifices and encouragement this volume would never have seen the light of day: Bryan Holt Grayson and Sam's wife and children, Barbara, Iris, and Enzo.

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It is difficult to persuade anyone in Mexico, the United States, or Central America to talk openly and frankly about Los Zetas, much less speak at length about a group of men and women who incite unvarnished fear. As such, we are indebted to our friends and sources across the Americas who offered what information they could and enabled us to fill in the blanks left between various media stories, think tank reports, white papers, books, and other items in print that mentioned Los Zetas with some level of veracity.

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Lindsey C. Nicolai, a College of William & Mary graduate, who is bound for law school, conducted research, prepared tables, tracked down maps, edited chapters, and provided ideas on shaping the text. For this reason, her name appears on the title page.

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With so many helping hands, we must attribute any errors of omission or commission to Hurricane Irene, who struck with a vengeance as we were completing the manuscript. No doubt, this vicious lady injected questionable entries that neither we nor the publisher discovered.

Map 1 Map of Mexico

Source: Congressional Research Service, "Mexico: Issues for Congress," by Clare Ribando Seelke, June 9, 2011. http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32724.pdf.

Introduction

In 2009, Miguel Ángel Morales Treviño convened a meeting of corrupt police in Nuevo Laredo, a drug-smuggling Mecca across from Laredo, Texas. No sooner had these law-enforcement officers, who constituted 70 to 80 percent of the municipality's force, slouched into their seats than "El 40," as Morales Treviño is called, admonished them against betraying Los Zetas, one of Mexico's most powerful drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) that he cocommands.

After this harangue, a brace of thick-necked toughs dragged into the dimly lit room a distraught female officer whom El 40 condemned as a "government informant." Rather than allowing her to defend herself with a single word, the thugs tied her hands and prevented her from moving. Morales Treviño stepped forward, grabbed a two-by-four and, after a couple of practice swings as if he were batting clean-up, methodically began to beat her, beginning with her tear-stained face. Once released, the alleged traitor's body collapsed into a broken mass, so mangled, bruised, and bloodied that it was impossible to recognize that she had ever been a living human being. The stunned and frightened onlookers got the message.

Such savagery has not always been part of life in Nuevo Laredo and other criminal enclaves such as Reynosa, Matamoros, Tampico, and Ciudad Victoria in the South Carolina-sized state of Tamaulipas. Decades of neglect, economic malaise, the unintended consequences of government policies, and the effect of enormous criminal wealth on an impoverished populace have weakened the government's presence and power in this northeastern region, one of the most criminally active in Latin America.

Its proximity to the United States has long made Tamaulipas an enticing venue for criminal organizations. Its geographical location has subjected the state to shocks of violence as wave after wave of Mexican lawbreakers have pushed and pulled against one another in an underworld dance of power and influence. The first modern era

capo to rise out of this dusty border region was Don Juan Nepomuceno Guerra, who became a legend for cold-blooded executions. One tale claims that he gunned down Pancho Villa's son. It is also rumored that he killed a man for talking too loudly in his presence.[1]

Juan bootlegged whisky during Prohibition along the Gulf Coast before founding the Gulf Cartel in the 1970s with the complicity of Rafael Chao López and Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, commanders in the notoriously corrupt Federal Security Directorate (DFS). Through political connections that he had nurtured, Don Juan, who reportedly never spent more than "a few hours in jail," smuggled contraband into South Texas via established routes through the border cities of Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros. He also amassed a fortune in the arms trade, prostitution, protection, and gambling. The kingpin, who conducted business under a gilded cage of chirping canaries in his "Piedras Negras" restaurant in Matamoros, tutored his American-born nephew Juan García Abrego in the art of stealing automobiles. An apt student, the young man drew upon his uncle's latticework of trusted contacts to expand the family's illicit business into trafficking a more lucrative product—cocaine.[2] García Abrego entered into a new relationship with Colombian producers whom US authorities were successfully targeting in Florida and Mid-Atlantic states. Operations "Impunity" (1997–99) and "Millennium" (1998–99) resulted in the arrest of ninety-three individuals linked to the Amado Carrillo Fuentes drug-trafficking organization headquartered in Juárez and the arrest of thirty-one individuals, including Fabio Ochoa-Vasquez and Alejandro Bernal-Madrigal, former members of the original Medellin Cartel. At the time of their capture, they were considered two of the most powerful cocaine traffickers in the world.

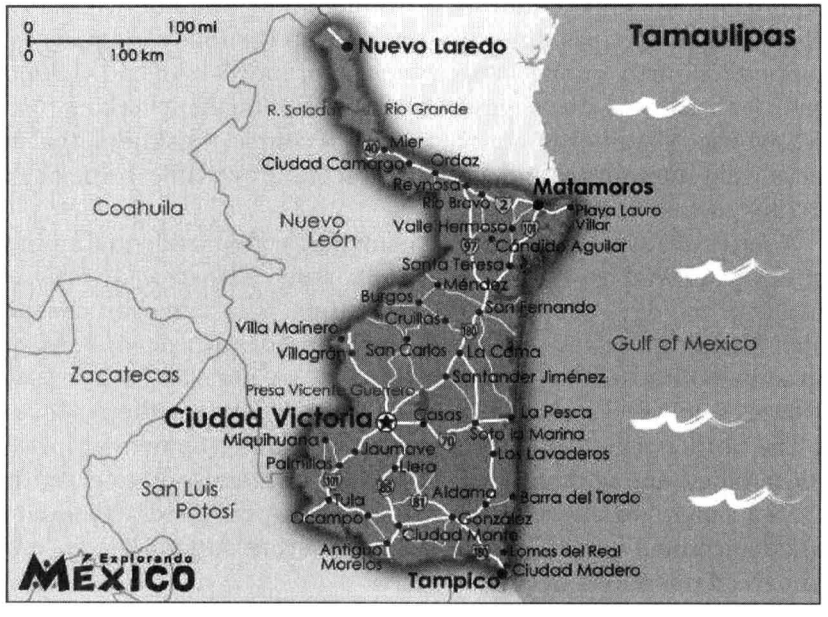
García Abrego guaranteed the suppliers delivery anywhere in America in return for 50 percent of the load. After his arrest in early 2006, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén clawed his way to the summit of the affluent Gulf Cartel.[3]

Decades before Cárdenas' rise to power, economic booms and busts had shredded the social fabric of Tamaulipas. These cycles helped impel the rise of a man who would eventually become one of the most remarkable trafficking bosses in Latin America, as organized crime increasingly became an important source of wealth, employment, and social welfare.

Tamaulipas lies along the Gulf of Mexico and once depended heavily on agriculture, construction, and light manufacturing in the North;

government activities, universities, and silviculture dominated Ciudad Victoria, the state capital nestled in the Sierra Madres. Highway 101, which runs through scrub forests of mesquite, prickly pear, and creosote, connects this picturesque city to Matamoros. Shipping, fishing, and petroleum production and refining power actuated the economy of the southern ports of Tampico, Altamira, and Ciudad Madero. Yet periods of feast and famine have swept across the state, especially the northern cities, since the Mexican–American War and the Mexican Revolution. During World War II, dollars poured into the area, thanks to the Bracero Program that allowed Mexicans to work lawfully in agriculture on a seasonal basis inside the United States. It replaced Americans siphoned into the war effort. Opposed by the AFL-CIO, the initiative also impeded the unionization of farm hands.[4] As a stream of unlawful workers paralleled their legal countrymen, the end of this guest worker initiative brought a major economic downturn to the area in the mid-1960s.

Map 2 Map of Tamaulipas



Source: Explorando México at www.explorandomexico.com.mx.

To address soaring unemployment, the Mexican and US governments launched the Border Industrialization Program or "Maquiladora" initiative. This scheme involved the construction of twin factories—one north of the frontier that accomplished the capital-intensive aspects of producing television sets, toys, clothing, furniture, plastics, auto parts, and footwear; south of the border, plants imported raw materials duty-free, performed labor-intensive tasks, and exported assembled products, lowering the cost of products in the United States and creating jobs that paid more than the Mexican average wage.

Arrival of these maquiladoras reshaped the state's socioeconomic landscape.[5] Cheap labor, peso devaluations, and the favorable legal framework made "in bond" industries appealing to domestic and foreign companies doing business in the United States. The program attracted tens of thousands of females because of their dexterity, malleability, and reliable work habits. Many of these women were young, unmarried, single mothers, and migrants from rural areas. Although earning substantially more than in the countryside, they were vulnerable to exploitation, unemployment, and violence.

Still, the number of attacks on females in Tamaulipas paled in comparison with Ciudad Juárez where approximately five hundred *feminicidos*, systematic murder of women, took place between 1993 and 2008. Tamaulipas did begin to catch up the following year, and jumped to fourth among Mexico's states for murders of and violence against females—with the greatest number of incidents taking place in Reynosa, Matamoros, and Tampico. Of course, most nonlethal attacks went unreported and with little recourse available, some of the victims turned to prostitution.[6]

A series of economic crises that coincided with presidential administrations in Mexico (1976, 1982, 1988, and 1994) strongly affected profits of the dual-plants. At the same time, access to even cheaper labor found companies—including those owned by Mexicans—pulling up stakes and relocating to Central America, China, and other Asian countries. Job-seekers who had made the trek from southern Mexico to the border region found themselves without employment, without families, and without local ties. Many of them tried to enter the United States illegally; others remained behind, resigned to their fates and determined to make the best of an onerous situation; and some embarked upon lives of crime.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect on January 1, 2004, was a godsend for Mexico's macroeconomy.

The trilateral pact ballooned the nation's trade with its continental partners and pulled in an unprecedented influx of foreign investment. Nevertheless, small businesses and subsistence farms could not compete with the influx of less expensive American and Canadian goods produced by vastly more efficient enterprises, such as many giant agribusinesses that enjoyed generous tax benefits and subsidies. The accord also gave smugglers such as Osiel Cárdenas Guillén unprecedented access to the global system for his Colombian cocaine. Even as NAFTA began to liberalize Mexico's once-cocooned market, many bottlenecks remained intact: virtual monopolies and oligopolies in telecommunications, the mass media, cement, processed foods, oil, electricity, education, and petroleum.

The disastrous "Christmas Crisis" plunged Mexico into another recession in late 1994. This traumatic event prevented the then president, Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), from implementing his promised modernization of agriculture through regional development that included research into new and improved crops, the establishment of small, rural industries, targeted subsidies, farm-to-market roads, and cooperatives.

Consequently, legitimate Mexican farmers shifted from traditional fruits, vegetables, and grains to the cultivation of drugs.[7] For decades, kaleidoscopic changes afflicted Tamaulipas, which languished amid stagnation and a sharp rise in unemployment in the debacle of the mid-1990s.

By the time this economic disaster had arrived, traditional social safety nets undergirded by the long-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Roman Catholic Church had decayed. The flow abroad of workers, who had been migrating to the United States for decades, accelerated in the 1990s. Men, usually alone or with male counterparts, legally and illegally entered the United States to earn money required to support their families. As a result, many rural municipalities in the North were divested of men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. Males who remained in the state gravitated to the narco-economy, which constituted far more than illegal agriculture—that is, "it [had] a huge multiplier effect in the vast array of other jobs it generates both directly (e.g., transportation, security, banking, and communication) and indirectly (e.g., construction, the service sector, and spin-off businesses)."[8]

The northern cities became portals for three-way commerce among Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Every day, more than ten

thousand cargo trucks and freight cars rumble across the International Bridge, the Juárez-Lincoln Bridge, and the Libre Comercio Bridge. In addition, the Texas Mexican Railway and Kansas City Southern de México own the Laredo International Railway Bridge. The Laredo-ColombiaSolidarity Bridge, located twenty miles northwest of Nuevo Laredo, provides yet another bilateral link. All told, fifteen bridges—from Matamoros to Nuevo Laredo—connect Tamaulipas to Texas. These road and rail links constitute "the spinal cord of Pan-American trade."[9] Traffic from San Luis Potosí, Saltillo, and Monterrey converge at Nuevo Laredo before crossing to its sister city, Laredo, Texas, en route to Interstate 35 and states and provinces to the north. Another ten thousand trucks transit the border at other points, totaling over twenty thousand vehicle-crossings a day. At such high volumes, it was impossible for US customs to stop, inspect, and process more than 5 percent of every automobile, tractor-trailer rig, or boxcar. Increased pedestrian traffic contributed to drug smuggling. With the enactment of NAFTA, ever-larger quantities of narcotics, migrants, guns, and other contraband moved across the Rio Grande. At the same time, it was economically and politically destructive to close down the crossing even for a few hours. "The Nuevo Laredo–Laredo border [is] a smuggler's paradise."[10]

The paradise became even more appealing when, in October 2011, the United States began allowing Mexican trucks to travel throughout its northern neighbor without changing cabs at the border. The first such long-haul tractor-trailer left Apodaca, Nuevo León, crossed the World Trade Bridge in Laredo, and headed 450 miles north to Garland, Texas, carrying a large steel drilling structure.

Sometimes a container aboard a truck will be configured to include hidden compartments. "Other times," said a [driver] over breakfast, "they just roll up with guns and say: 'Open the door!'" Lorries are forced to resume their journeys with drugs on board. The drivers complain that haulage companies' efforts to outwit criminals are inevitably met with countermeasures. "They give us GPS systems to make sure we don't go anywhere off the route, but some people are told to switch them off. They have special seals now, but the bad guys know how to break them and make them look as before."[11]

As NAFTA opened the world to Osiel Cárdenas and his cohorts in crime, shoot-outs and killings by competing syndicates became a regular occurrence during the latter years of the Vicente Fox Quesada presidency (2000–06). Infamous capo El Chapo Guzmán Loera headed

the Sinaloa Cartel, also called the Sinaloa Federation. He and his allies in the Arturo Beltrán Organization (ABO) sought to break the grip of the Gulf Cartel (CDG) on the Tamaulipas transit points.

Meanwhile, groups such as Carrillo Fuentes' Juárez Cartel, mentioned earlier, and the Tijuana Cartel specialized in extreme violence and accepted zero tolerance for slights of honor. They had staked their criminal empire on controlling access to the United States, creating a "have" and "have not" environment within Mexico's underworld. They would not give up this prized position easily when newcomers invaded their terrain. Conflict escalated dramatically under Fox's successor, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, who took office on December 1, 2006. Soon after his inauguration, the new chief executive dispatched large contingents of the army and Federal Police to the violence-plagued northern states. These incursions coincided with an upsurge in narco-related killings along the border from 651 (2007) to 2,648 (2008) to 2,853 (2009), to 5,283 (2010), and 5,283 (2011).[12]

In the past, Mexicans seeking to flee untenable situations made haste to the United States. The porosity of the border ensured eventual success; if a migrant did not make it on his first or second attempt, he would usually accomplish the feat the third time.

Yet, a medley of factors—reaction to the September 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon and the twin trade towers, the dispatch of US troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and intractably high American joblessness—prompted Washington to devote more personnel and resources to securing its two-thousand-mile long frontier with Mexico. States such as Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah enacted stringent legislation to stanch the inflow of illegal workers. Those who managed to sneak across the border found it extremely difficult to obtain work. Texas governor and presidential aspirant, Rick Perry, even threatened to send troops into Mexico to end cartel-related violence should he win the White House.[13]

The severe economic downturn that began in 2008 also beset migrants' family members and friends in the United States. As a result, the roughly one hundred thousand *tamaulipecos* residing abroad sent far fewer dollars back to Mexico—with Tamaulipas suffering one of the nation's sharpest declines in "remittances." These receipts plummeted from $490 million (January–June 2007) to $260.4 million (January–June 2008) to $95 million (January–March 2011).[14] Many immigrants who came to their native state for the 2009–10 Christmas holidays decided not to return to "El Norte" because bleak economic

prospects in America exacerbated unemployment at home. For example, when some fifteen thousand people flooded into their small hometown of Tula, in southern Tamaulipas, the mayor complained that the returnees precipitated social problems and overburdened the municipality's budget, which depended heavily on funds from abroad. "As mayor I have a flow of people asking for money to buy food, medicine, gasoline, clothing, and even their electricity bills . . . here is where you find [economic problems] affecting families," he said.[15] An entrepreneur's attempt to organize "narco-tours" of sites of executions, gun battles, and other historical sites came a cropper in light of escalating bloodshed.[16]

The absence of opportunities accentuated the appeal of criminal groups. Perhaps, some reasoned, it was easier to break the law in Mexico, especially because of the ubiquitous corruption of police, prosecutors, and judges. In addition, the so-called Ni-Nis—teenagers who neither work nor study—abounded. Even wrongdoers who suffered arrest and incarceration frequently managed to escape from the state's sieve-like, overcrowded prisons, thanks to incompetent administrators, venal guards, and cartel-engineered breakouts. Imprisoned or not, dreadful conditions in the state could not meet the needs of the half million individuals of its 3,268,554 inhabitants who had been found to suffer mental illness.[17]

Drug abuse continued to climb. A Ministry of Education's National Survey placed Tamaulipas number one in the consumption of narcotics out of thirty-one states and the Federal District (DF). In an earlier study, the state ranked third in the use of crack cocaine and heroin.[18] So desperate was the addiction level that Antonio González Sánchez, bishop of Ciudad Victoria, called for legalizing the use of all drugs in Mexico. "Some say that this will lead to more addiction—I sincerely don't believe it; current addicts will continue being addicts and those who are going to be addicts will try drugs whether or not they are legalized. I don't believe that this [reform] will increase the problem." He emphasized that changing the law would reduce the high level of violence, the narco-trafficking, and the insecurity that devastated his country. He added that alcohol was legal and "does far more damage than any other type of drug."[19]

Bishop González Sánchez's views, which he stressed were personal, drew criticism from the Tamaulipas health secretary, who underscored the imperative to reinforce established programs. Yet the Mitofsky

consulting firm found that 75 percent of respondents believed insecurity was increasing in the North.[20] And a November 2011 poll taken by *Reforma* newspaper found that 51 percent of those surveyed said the cartels were winning "the war against narco-trafficking."[21] Such results were music to the ears of Mexico's criminal elite, who rely on impunity as they conduct their multifarious criminal activities (Table 1 sets forth the number and types of crimes committed during the first quarters of 2009, 2010, and 2011).

The bloodletting tormenting Nuevo Laredo prompted the Laredo, Texas, Chamber of Commerce to delete its twin city from local road markers lest travelers encounter harm when crossing the border. In the face of an uproar from its Mexican neighbor, the city's mayor apologized and restored signs pointing the way to the Tamaulipas municipality.[22]

The recent economic, social, and political history of Tamaulipas reflected how decades of malfeasance, corruption, impunity, and a host of other embedded factors played out across Mexico in favor of criminals and a limited number of citizens and state officials. The eroded civil contract between state and populace engendered an environment where even the least ambitious criminals might thrive; the more predatory lawbreakers eventually formed their own social system, tilted toward violence and black market economics that

Table 1 Serious Crimes Committed in Tamaulipas (first quarters of 2009, 2010, and 2011)

Crime	2009	2010	2011
Robberies of homes[a]	81	100	103
Robberies of stores[a]	110	171	153
Robberies of vehicles[a]	390	257	823
Robberies of pedestrians[a]	104	142	226
Robberies in intersections	0	0	28
Murders	230	154	303
Premeditated murders (Homicidios dolosos)	71	126	188
Kidnappings	7	6	30
Rapes	125	95	132

[a]Involved violence.
Source: Henia Prado, "Crecen delitos en Tamaulipas," *Reforma.com*, April 24, 2011.

spurned all normal government services except one: employment. The opportunities offered by Osiel Cárdenas Guillén and his counterparts fomented a reality where criminals acquired more lethal force than law-enforcement agencies, which often devolved into snake pits of venality.

Men like Osiel become modern-day caudillos, and as many analysts have observed, over the past ten years, one criminal group has revealed itself as the most barbaric in Mexico, and indeed in several other countries. This book discusses the Gulf Cartel's recruitment of Latin America's most deadly and diverse transnational criminal organization, Los Zetas; analyzes the paramilitaries' structure and training as it has evolved from a Praetorian Guard into an independent entity; evaluates the resources at its disposal; discusses its "branding" as it has diversified into multiple criminal rubrics; describes its psychological operations (PSYOPS); compares Los Zetas with La Familia Michoacana/Knights Templars,[23] another relatively new syndicate; explores the "dual sovereignty" that Los Zetas have developed with elected state and municipal governments; examines the nation's "Zetanization"; traces the syndicate's expansion into other Latin American nations; probes the mercenaries' penetration of the United States; and, finally, focuses on its future in light of the warfare raging between Los Zetas and their foes in the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels, the Knights Templars, and the Mexican and US governments

Notes

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3. Peter Lupsha, "Transnational Narco-Corruption and Narco-Investment: A Focus on Mexico," *Transnational Organized Crime* (spring 1995).
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7. Bowden, *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
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McDonald wrote about Michoacán, the same situation applies to Tamaulipas.

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21. Alejandro Moreno and María Antonia Mancillas "Encuesta/Respaldan labor de Fuerzas Armadas, *Reforma*, December 1, 2011; in March 2011, the same analysts found that 54 percent of respondents believed that organized crime was winning the war; see "Ven fines distintos en Guerra al narco," *Reforma*, April 1, 2011.
22. Juan Manuel Reyes Cruz, "Se disculpa Texas; quita letreros de Laredo para evitar a 'extraños,'" *Excélsior*, May 20, 2011.
23. Since 2010, the majority faction of La Familia Michoacana refers to themselves as the Knights Templars.