

# Drugs and Death: The Mexican Connection

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NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico, September 2 — Oblivious to the violence, the American tourists tramp through the sun-baked Early Metro-Goldwyn Mayer main drag, Guerrero Avenue, pushing their way through the tax free bazaars heaped with tax-free liquor, cigarettes, cut-rate jewelry and handcrafted schlock. Most of them are unaware that two other specialties of this Rio Grande border town are mutilated corpses and narcotics traffic. The relationship between corpses and narcotics is more than a casual one.

The machine gun and the machete have taken the lives of some 85 Mexican police, customs officials, drug pushers and hapless Americans within the past year. It has created what one local journalist calls a "psychosis of terror" in Nuevo Laredo.

Day after day the newspapers have published photographs of the blood-spattered or decapitated remains of the latest victims of the violence. One of the newspapers, El Manana, had its plant machine-gunned and its presses sabotaged late last year as an admonition against identifying local hoodlums.

Violence has long been endemic to the Mexi-

can border, where men still slouch at the bar with a gun tucked under their belt. But the leaf of bloodshed has far surpassed even Nuevo Laredo's gory standards of tolerance.

The underlying reason for the violence of Nuevo Laredo has been its emergence as the principal "Mexican connection" along the 1,200-mile Texas-Mexican border for the smuggling of heroin, opium, cocaine and marijuana into the United States.

Mexico itself has, in the view of veteran narcotics officials, become the principal narcotics pipeline because of the tightened sur-

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veillance of the ports of entry along the American eastern seaboard and the Canadian border.

### A Sieve for Smugglers

And Nuevo Laredo now lies along a major narcotics thoroughfare that runs northward from Mexico City and Monterrey along Highway 85 funneling into the valley of Texas.

The border region is a sieve to smugglers. Thousands of cars and pedestrians swarm across the international bridge into Laredo each day. In many places the Rio Grande can easily be forded by a determined man with a backpack.

There are many points at which cotton grows and cattle graze in the riverbed and a truck can drive across its width. Hundreds of small, private planes used for crop-dusting and ranch-to-ranch transport can easily be converted into drug conveyers.

Within the past year the Nixon Administration has sought to prod the Mexican government into stricter enforcement activity in an area where police officials have traditionally tended to wink or doze or enrich themselves.

### Official Amity

President Nixon has conferred with Mexican President Luis Echeverria. Director John E. Ingersoll of the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs has met with Mexican Attorney General Pedro J. Ojeda Paullada. Ojeda's son summered this year with the family of U.S. Attorney General Richard Kleindienst.

The amity, at least as the highest level of officialdom, has rarely run so thick on both sides of the border. But at the operational level—the streets of Nuevo Laredo—the frustrations of the lawmen, both American and Mexican, are considerable.

One narcotics official, speaking of recent reverses in the joint campaign to reduce the drug flow across the border, refers despondently to the "Mexican disconnection".

Such is the setting in which the violence has flourished here for more than a year between police and rival gangs, such as the Reyes Prunedas and the Gayton Clans, who once feuded fiercely for control of the lucrative drug stream



Associated Press

**E. PERALES RIOS**  
... machine-gunned

that flowed along Highway 85 past their ranches.

Police on both sides of the border as well as knowledgeable residents of Nuevo Laredo identify the principal figure in the town's underworld elite as Francisco Javier Bernal Lopez, who seems to relish the two nicknames that the press has conferred upon him: El Padrino (the godfather) and El Abogado Del Diablo (the devil's advocate).

Bernal, an attorney, is a heavy-set, moustachioed man of imposing presence who habitually carries a gun in his belt and sometimes a .45 caliber machine gun at his shoulder. He openly acknowledges that his clientele consists of drug traffickers as well as the touch pistoleros, or hired guns, who drift up from the interior's farmlands to make a quick dollar and others engaged in what is not conventionally considered as upright enterprise.

Bernal emerged from obscurity some 10 months ago to preside over the feuding criminal factions in this border region. Police and Mexican federal authorities ascribe to him an important role in governing Nuevo Laredo's drug smuggling underworld.

### Accuses CIA

"He is the only one with the brains to run the organization," said one high-ranking Mexican law enforcement official sent here to bring the lawless state of affairs under control. "The rest are illiterate hoodlums."

Bernal denies the accusations. He replies that the CIA and FBI were responsible for some of the killings.

"I do my work, and my work is defending people," Bernal said at a recent street corner press conference.

He also contends that in several drug seizures and arrests Mexican police stood back while more aggressive U.S. narcotics agents took the initiative. It is Bernal's one accusation that some law enforcement officials concede is not wholly without foundation.

Under the protocols governing American narcotics operations here, U.S. agents can offer various forms of assistance at the request of Mexico. Such acts of assistance, say knowledgeable officials, have at times taken an active form. This was recently made evident by underworld threats here to kill an American agent assigned to work with Mexican federal police.

Authorities questioned Bernal last Tuesday for more than two hours on events that led up to the assassination last July 28 of Federal Police Commandant Everardo Perales Rios, who had run an aggressive campaign against drug smuggling during a six-week tenure that ended with his death.

### High Drug Haul

The murder of Perales, who was sent to Nuevo Laredo to head the Mexican federal police presence in the state of Tamaulipas, was a signal event in the border drug war.

During his short-lived incumbency, Commandant Perales hauled in more drugs than had been seized in Nuevo Laredo in the precious quarter of a century, according to narcotics officials, including about two pounds of heroin with a retail value of \$200,000, three tons of marijuana and caches of cocaine and opium.

"He was for a change, a man with whom we could work effectively," said one high-ranking U.S. narcotics official.

As the pace of his anti-smuggling activities picked up momentum, there were threats both against Perales and against an American narcotics agent working with him along the border. Word filtered back that the \$3,000 contract had been issued on the U.S. agent's life and his superiors in the Bureau of Narcotics pulled him back above the border.

### Perales Assassinated

On the evening of July

28 Perales pulled out of the Federal Building in a borrowed 1972 Camaro and he drove less than 12 blocks when a red Mustang pulled alongside and there was a burst of machine-gun fire. Four .45 caliber slugs tore through the commandant's head and his car careened into a fence.

Two days before the assassination, in a development that mystified law enforcement officials close to the case, the Mexican government sent out word that Perales had been fired from his position as Federal Police Commandant of Tamaulipas State for misconduct in his job. The young Federal Prosecutor who worked with him on the drug cases, America Melendez Reyna, was also called back to Mexico City under circumstances not yet fully explained.

After his funeral the widow and family were not even provided with transportation to follow the hearse to the burial grounds. A relative had to hail a passing cab to pursue the disappearing remains of Perales.

But the response to the assassination in Mexico City was to assign the full complement of 200 soldiers in the Nuevo Laredo Federal Garrison to support Perales' successor, Antonio Peral Ore. A succession of special investigators from the attorney generals office showed up in Nuevo Laredo to consult on the case.

Through the eyes of the central government in Mexico City the border is a remote and somewhat ungovernable hinterland that has always tended toward anonymous rule by local interests. And the reigning economic interests in Nuevo Laredo, as in many other bordertowns, are tourism and smuggling—principally

Mexican federal agents redope smuggling. receive the equivalent of \$280 a month and must pay their own hotel bills and other travelling expenses. In the Mexican border region forrd and board costs nearly as much as on the American side of the line. The agents get neither guns nor cars. Their susceptibility to minor and major acts of corruption is hardly hept to a minimum.

### Official Corruption

In 1970 the head of the Mexican Federal Judicial



Police, Col. Manuel Suarez-Dominguez, was arrested in San Antonio with 89 pounds of heroin (retail value \$44 million) from French sources. His position corresponded to the combined offices of the FBI Director and U.S. Attorney General.

His was perhaps the most extreme illustration of official corruption (he ran up gambling debts of more than \$1 million in Las Vegas) but the Mexican government is still grappling with more humble and commonplace instances of corruption.

The system of mordita—the literal translation is "little bite" and it refers to bribery—still is a dominant way of life.

If a Mexican national wishes to bring an American refrigerator or automobile from the United States, he is legally obligated to pay a duty of 100 per cent. A customs official, on the other hand, can tap him for 50 percent of the price and let him pass.

For the financially-pressed customs agent and the purchaser there is a mutual financial benefit in winking at the law. And so it is that the mordita system lubricates the cross border flow of refrigerators, cars and television sets into Mexico and of heroin into the United States.

Some visitors are content to drink and watch the Amazonian antics of Yolande, a 6-foot-4 entertainer who can smoke a pipe or cigarette in the cleavage of her bosom thanks to extraordinary muscular control. Others come to the zone for a readily available heroin hit.

Earlier this week Mexican authorities were planning a major strike operation against members of drug trafficking gangs thought to be holed up in a group of ranches with their private army of some 70 pistoleros.

Because of the absence of cars for the Mexican police, officials planning the strike had to rent 11 station wagons from the Hertz Co. as mobile strike vehicles. "The Hertz people insisted on \$500 up front," one official explained. The Mexican gov-

ernment was unable to meet the demand.

#### Drug Strike Suspended

At the moment plans for the attack have been suspended. Unexpected legal complications have arisen, A new member of the attorney general's staff showed up in Nuevo Laredo and asked that the carefully worked out plans for the assault be deferred until further consultation was held with Mexico City.

Last Wednesday Mexican officials were requesting aerial reconnaissance help from the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics as well as police radios to coordinate the ground action. Suddenly interest in the project cooled. Cooperating U.S. officials are reported to be baffled by the turnabout.

Today the Mexican federal troops and police

lounge around the Federal Building in Nuevo Laredo while dope pushers circulate freely in an adjoining park. Or they doze during the 110-degree afternoon heat in abandoned cars in the sunken courtyard of the Federal Building.

In the park the water fountains don't work and the grass grows over the feet of the statues. The citizens of Nuevo Laredo await the next installment of violence with a sense of apprehension that has become permanent.

"First the people were terrified," related one newspaperman with 20 years of reporting experience on the border. "Then last month when the soldiers came, the Mafia was terrified. But I am afraid the Mafia is here to stay. Too many people are involved."





Associated Press

Police inspect the car in which Mexican mobsters killed a Nuevo Laredo policeman in the border city's drug war.