

Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council
On December 8, 2011 by

Sylvia Longmire

Former Senior Intelligence Analyst for the
State of California on Drug Trafficking and Border Violence

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak to you all tonight. This is a situation that is very near and dear to my heart; that I am very, very passionate about. People, when they hear about what going on in Mexico – particularly the average American, no matter where in the United States they live – they ask themselves a question, just like they do when they hear about any crisis situation going on anywhere in the world: Why should I care? What does this mean for me and my family? What does this mean for me and my community? And if there's no solid answer that comes along with that, they move on to the next thing.

For many people in the United States, the drug war in Mexico might as well be occurring in China; might as well be occurring in Kashmir; might as well be occurring in Afghanistan. So, in the brief time that I have with you tonight, I'm going to talk to you about what's going on in Mexico, why it's happening and more importantly – and the main goal of my book, to impress upon the American public – why we should care, and the direct impact it is having on our national security.

So, to start off, the war inside Mexico – right now, the death toll attributed to the drug war is at 53,000 and climbing every year. What's going on is that

we have five major cartels right now – and “cartel” being somewhat of an inaccurate word, but it’s a lot easier than me saying “transnational criminal organization” – so we’ll go with cartel for now. So five major large cartels that are fighting, not only with each other for control of lucrative drug smuggling routes from Mexico to the United States. They’re also fighting against the Mexican government for the freedom to basically do however they see fit.

In addition to the five major cartels – and that number fluctuates from year to year. Two years ago we had seven major cartels, a few years before that we only had three. So a year from now, who knows how many we’ll have? There are also at least a dozen to two dozen smaller mini cartels, criminal organizations that are also involved in the drug smuggling business and have sometimes aligned themselves one way or another with one of the larger cartels.

Very specific parts of Mexico are being affected by the drug violence. Many people are under the impression that the entire country of Mexico is awash in bloodshed and that has a very negative impact on Mexico’s tourism, Mexico’s economy and foreign investment, and that’s simply not the case. The places in Mexico that are being affected by the violence are for a very specific reason. Either they are drug trafficking points along the border, or drug train shipment points where either precursor chemicals or cocaine are being brought from outside Mexico into the country for further shipment to the north.

Talk a little bit about how the cartels got to where they are. The first drug trafficking organizations in Mexico were actually Chinese. The Chinese brought over poppies from China in the mid-1800s when they were working as laborers and they actually had the corner on the drug trafficking business when they were funneling heroine through Tijuana into Southern California.

Well the Mexicans aren't stupid. They saw this and said, "You know what? I think we can do this better than the Chinese." So they took control of the drug trade in the late 1800s and they've been making it better for them ever since.

In the 1960s, with the hippie era, as drug use exploded here, they moved into marijuana. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, as the use of cocaine started to explode, they also go into the cocaine business. They've started; actually a Honduran national is the one who started the cocaine trafficking from Colombia to Mexico, then into the United States. But in the late '80s when the cartels in Colombia started to get hit, the Cali and Medellin cartels, they ran out of options to get cocaine from Colombia into Florida, so they started to look towards the Mexicans to do that for them.

Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, who was known as the godfather of drug trafficking in Mexico, ran the whole show; the entire show. But he was captured in 1989, had to figure out what to do with his business, so he decided to divide it up amongst family members and trusted associates. Part of that share went to the Arellano Felix family – which is known as the Tijuana cartel; Juan Abrego, who was part of the Gulf cartel; the Carrillo Fuentes family – the Juarez cartel and then El Chapo, Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, who is now in charge of the Sinaloa Federation. And that's pretty much where everything we see today got started.

Now the real turning point: a lot of people look to the election of Felipe Calderón in 2006 as the true explosion of the Drug War into the violence that we see today. But actually, the real turning point in Mexico was the start of true democracy in 2000 when the PRI was kicked out of power and Vicente Fox was elected and the PEN came into power. Before that the PRI had a 71-year strangle hold on power in Mexico; extraordinarily corrupt, and they had pretty much a deal with the devil going with the cartels.

The PRI looked the other way, took their kickbacks from the cartels and the cartels could pretty much operate as they pleased. The main difference was that when the cartels got out of line, the government could come in, put their thumb down, make a few arrests and make a few disappearances and say, "Hey, get back with the program." And the cartels would actually do what the government told them to do.

When Vicente Fox came into office in 2000, that agreement was out the window. That agreement no longer existed and then everything just started to roll from there. Then Los Zetas came into the picture. Los Zetas were an enforcement group that worked for the Gulf Cartel. They started being recruited by the head of the Gulf Cartel, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, in the mid-to-late 1990s. Then Cárdenas Guillén was arrested in 2003 and at that time the battle for Nuevo Laredo started between El Chapo and Los Zetas, who were working for the Gulf Cartel. That's when the beheadings started, and that's when it started becoming a game of keeping up with the Joneses.

Whenever Los Zetas started beheading people, the rivals, to say, "Hey, we're just as scary as you are!" – had to start beheading people. And it has been escalating ever since. Then of course when Felipe Calderon was elected and came into office, he started deploying the military, hitting the cartels with everything he had. And the cartels started to fight back. So it was kind of like true democracy coming into play that kind of knocked over the gas can. Then, with Los Zetas coming into full force, they kind of threw the kindling in there. And then Calderon's election threw the match. So that's kind of how it has progressed.

The characteristics of violence: you have the cartels fighting against the government; assassinations; kidnappings; assaults; ambushes, etc. Then you have the cartels fighting each other with the beheadings, kidnappings,

etc. And now you have the cartels taking on the Mexican people, particularly Los Zetas, who are more fond of targeting innocent civilians.

Just a few months ago, the attack on the Casino Royale in Monterrey where 52 innocent Mexicans were killed, the Zetas attempted successfully to firebomb a casino and 52 people were trapped inside and pretty much burned to death. They're also well known for kidnapping migrants and holding them hostage for either ransom or forcing them to work for them and if they don't comply then they are executed on the spot. That happened with 72 migrants coming up from South America and Central America a little over a year ago in San Fernando.

Some of the things they are involved in: drug trafficking, of course, being the number-one profit-making activity by the cartels. The four kinds of drugs that are involved in trafficking are marijuana – which of course accounts for the largest volume of drugs that they are moving into the United States – cocaine, which accounts for the largest profit maker where drugs are concerned, methamphetamine and then heroin.

Three different ways that they are getting here, with overland being the most popular. Using cars; just regular vehicles and trucks, that's the most popular. Hidden compartments are huge. I am a huge fan of the show *Border Wars*. I love to show people that show – they help me out quite a bit, and if you ever watch that show it's awesome. Awesome to watch the video of when the cars pull up to the port of entry. They bring the drug dog. I mean, don't ever go up against a drug dog. You can't beat them. The dog alerts, they pull the car over in the secondary and then they start tooling around looking at everything. They start figuring out that they have to push this little switch and push this little button and then, boom! A panel opens up just right in the front and they start pulling out bags of crystal meth.

It's awesome what they do. And knowing that we only get a small percentage of the stuff that's coming across – imagine what is coming through if we are only getting a small percentage. Some of these hidden compartments cost tens of thousand of dollars to create. There are people in Mexico, that's all they do. They're very, very good at it and sometimes they are extremely tough to find.

Then by sea – that's considerably less common then it use to be, back in the *Miami Vice* era where you had the cigarette boats that were tooling across the Florida states with tons of drugs and stuff. That still happens, especially in Southern California, they'll come up from Mexico on pleasure boats and kind of tool around the Coronado Islands and then, in the middle of the night they will bring them over in rafts.

Drug subs – drug submarines – that's the new trend right now. Some of these drug submarines are absolute marvels of construction. They'll bring in Russian engineers into Columbia. These are multi-million dollar affairs that look like something right out of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* at Disneyland. But then you have other drug submarines that look like they are held together with cardboard, PVC and a few rounds of duct tape. But they all accomplish the same thing. They are large-haul vessels. You can put at least six tons of illegal drugs on these things. They putter along at only six to seven knots, it takes a week to two weeks for them to make the voyage from South America up along the Central American coast into Mexico. But they do what they are designed to do.

Then you have [smuggling] by air – probably the least common. They're still coming in on commercial aircraft and smuggled on small planes, but that is less common. The big trend in air trafficking is the use of ultra-lights. They can fly under the radar. They only carry one person, and they can carry up to 250-300 pounds of dope. It use to be that they actually had to land to drop

the load and then take off again to turn around and go back to Mexico. Now they can actually just drop the load and turn around and go back.

The *Border Wars* crew, when they were out filming one night, they just got really, really lucky. It was the first time that a nighttime drop of dope from an ultra-light was ever actually caught on film. It is pretty darn cool.

Moving over to weapons trafficking, I am probably going to skip over this because I always get in trouble. I always make somebody really mad when I talk about weapons trafficking, no matter what. But just to give you an overview of what is happening, one of the drug cartel's biggest activities is trying to get weapons into Mexico, so they can use them to kill each other and kill members of the various police forces. How they do this is the source of the debate, because nobody really knows how many guns are in Mexico because they are actually illegal to buy. That is the source of the problem.

The Mexican Constitution has its own version of the second amendment. However, federal laws prohibit private ownership to a certain extent. It is extremely difficult – *extremely* difficult – to legally own a gun in Mexico. So the drug cartels go to a very easy and cheap source just north of the border. They also get their guns from within Mexico from dirty sources, dirty military, dirty cops, etc. And they also get some military-grade weapons from Central America, Asia, and former Eastern Bloc countries. The big controversy is how many guns are coming from where? I am going to avoid the "Fast and Furious" bomb right now, unless somebody ask me the question and then I am more than happy to talk about it later. But that is obviously a big controversy where the ATF was intentionally allowing weapons into Mexico, and that added to the problem.

Straw purchasing – the way they do it is that they buy guns here legally. They use our own weapons laws against us. They will hire folks to work for

them who are U.S. citizens and who have clean backgrounds, and they will walk into a gun shop in Texas, Arizona, California, Washington State, Illinois, Nebraska – everybody thinks it is just the border states, but it's not. The fourth most common place for the cartels to buy weapons through the "straw-purchasing" method is Washington State, which is on the Canadian border not the southern border.

So they will walk into the store, and they'll have a laundry list of guns the cartels want, and they'll buy five, 10, 15, however many AR-15s, AK-47s, pistols, whatever it is they want. And they will pass the background check because they are completely clean. The only difference is that on the little ATF form that you have to fill out when you're buying a gun it asks you, "Are these guns for your personal use?" And they will lie and they will say, "No, I'm just starting a collection." And they will turn around and hand the guns off to a middleman, they'll get paid and their job is done.

So then what happens is, that middleman takes the guns and divides them up amongst couriers that are hired. Those couriers will take those guns and spread them out all along the border to take them southbound in vehicles. That's why it's called "hand trafficking," because it's all spread out and it's all these lines of cars going south with guns. The beauty of it is that, because you have all these different layers of people that are working to get this done, it eliminates – well it doesn't eliminate, but it reduces the cartel's exposure to law enforcement, because the guy who bought the guns in the shop has no idea who the couriers are; probably knows extremely little about the middleman. So it's a system that works against us and works through our own laws.

The bottom line is, though, because of the nature of the system; because it's so extraordinarily difficult to get any useful intel out of anybody that is arrested in the process, it is impossible to know the extent of the problem;

exactly how many weapons are coming from where, and anybody who says they know exactly how many weapons are coming from where is trying to sell you a bridge somewhere where this is no water.

The evolution of kidnapping: In Mexico, kidnapping is the second largest source of revenue for the cartels right now. Kidnapping is nothing new. It has been going on for a long time in Mexico. The difference is that traditionally it has been the cartels kidnapping each other, occasionally reaching into the family to send a message – very similar to how the Mafia has been operating here in the United States for quite some time. But that has evolved. Now it has become a free-for-all where innocent people are being kidnapped for money. Family members of cartels are now being kidnapped. Children are being kidnapped.

And also, it's not just the cartels that are involved in the kidnappings. Anybody can just get a gun and round up a gang of people and say, "You know what? That guy looks like he might have some money. Or he looks like he might have some relatives back in the United States that have some money that could pay ransom, so let's go grab him and stick him in a dirty apartment and start making phone calls to collect some money."

The problem is that when these amateurs get into the business, they don't know what they are doing. I will give you a comparison with Colombia. In Colombia you actually have terrorist groups operating, like the FARC and the ELN. So if you get kidnapped by the FARC, they're professionals. They know what they're doing and they know that a live hostage is worth a heck of a lot more money than a dead hostage. So they actually work a decent amount to keep you alive. They will feed you pretty nasty food and they will keep you in a very dirty environment, but they'll give you medicine if it looks like you are in really bad shape and they'll hang on to you until they can collect the

ransom. Very few people that are kidnapped by groups like the FARC and the ELN are actually killed.

In Mexico, something like one out of seven hostages is killed. Just to give you an example of the difference of how they treat their prisoners, in Colombia, if they want to prove the hostage is alive – the “proof-of-life” – they’ll take a picture of you holding that day’s newspaper to say, “Yup, he was alive on this day.” In Mexico they’ll cut off your finger, and they’ll stick it in an envelope and send it to your family. “Yup that’s his finger! He’s alive.” So there is a huge difference in how they treat kidnapping there and how it’s carried out, and very few people actually call the cops because a good portion of the time the cops are actually involved in the kidnapping itself. So it’s a very big challenge to try and stop it.

Then you have cross-border cases. Cross-border kidnapping is when somebody is kidnapped here in the United States and then taken south into Mexico and held for hostage there. Phoenix made headlines a couple years ago being the kidnap capital of the United States, and they reported, at the time, that 359 people had been kidnapped in the city of Phoenix in 2009. So of course it was splattered all over the news and everybody was freaking out. There were retired couples planning on taking an RV trip across the southwest who were calling the Phoenix Police Department asking if they should go around the city of Phoenix because they were afraid they were going to get pulled over and dragged out of their RV at gunpoint by Mexican criminals. I mean it was all just blown out of proportion.

The problem was that the city of Phoenix was giving bad kidnapping numbers. It turned out that they had been pumping up the numbers in order to bring in more grant money from the federal government. The thing was, though, after they cleaned up the numbers and got the accurate number of kidnapping cases, it turned out that it was 268 people, which is still an

extraordinarily high number for any city in the United States. The majority of those folks, probably 99% of them are bad guys and the city of Phoenix will tell, "We'll get the kidnapper; put 'em in handcuffs; send him to jail. We'll make sure that the kidnapping victim goes to the hospital; gets cleaned up; gets checked out. And then, as soon as he's fine we'll put handcuffs on him and send him to the same place that we sent the kidnapper.

But now, increasingly, migrants who are coming to the United States are being targeted because the kidnappers know that the migrant workers have family members in the United States. Those family members are a nice little source of ransom money, and many times they are held for ransom in safe houses here in the United States. I have seen pictures of extraordinarily unsanitary conditions. They are very, very hot. There is no air conditioning in these homes.

Sometimes you will have 20 to 30 people all on one room. They are not fed or given water very often and it's really, really bad. And this is not happening in some horrible neighborhood or in a warehouse where there is nobody around. A lot of times these safe houses are in middle-class neighborhoods in a cul-de-sac, right down the street from places where kids are out riding their bikes and playing with their friends, and that surprises a lot of people.

So what is President Calderón trying to do to solve the problem? He started his "hit-'em-hard-and-hit-'em-as-hard-as-you-can" strategy shortly after coming into office. He looked at the military as his first and, probably, his only option. He felt he could not rely on the state and local police, due to extraordinary levels of corruption amongst the state and local police – less so at the federal level. So I think they're up to 45,000 troops deployed to various hot spots around the country. The problem is it's an unsustainable strategy; like putting your finger in the dike.

They will send the military to one particular city for a certain amount of time, and perhaps things will calm down there for a few months. But then, when things get better, the military has to get pulled out and redeployed to another hot spot. The cartels will just lie low, and then things will start to heat back up in that area. But that is one of the few options that he has had available to him.

Cleaning house – trying to reduce corruption as much as he can at all levels; making arrests of politicians; appointed officials. Entire police departments have been fired; putting through confidence tests that they did in Juarez a few years ago. But, unfortunately, the lure of money and the threat of death are just too powerful. You can clean out an entire police force of 300 police and replace them with newly trained, polygraphed clean recruits and sometimes within a matter of months there in just as bad shape as the people that were cleaned out before.

It's something called "*plata o plomo?*" Silver or lead? Take the bribe or take the bullet. There are clean cops in Mexico. Yes they do exist. But they are extraordinarily afraid. I have worked on many asylum cases for police officers who have been kidnapped – many attempts made on their lives. They come to the United States requesting asylum because they are absolutely afraid for their lives. So there are definitely clean cops in Mexico, but the threat of death, kidnapping and torture if they don't comply with the cartels is absolutely extraordinarily high.

The broken justice system – Mexico's justice system is very different from our own. They are working to change some aspects of that. Right now it is *presumed guilty until proven innocent*, where it is the opposite, obviously here. In many instances they are trying to change that, but only 25% of crimes are actually reported. Only two percent of those are successfully prosecuted. If you are one of the few people that actually make it into jail,

the chances that you are actually going to stay there for a long period of time is very, very small. So a lot of the prison guards are bribed or threatened by cartel members who are in jail. Every now and then we see reports of huge prison breaks, and then all of the guards and the warden are arrested after the prison break because they were in on it. So that's another huge challenge.

Decriminalization is something the government took a look at – very quietly – a couple of years ago. Decriminalizing personal-use amounts of, well, almost everything: marijuana, cocaine, heroine, and LSD. The goal was to focus less on the small-time user and try to go after the big-time cartels and dealers. However, that has not resulted in any major reduction of drug use. If anything, in some parts of Mexico, local drug use has actually gone up quite a bit. So the decriminalization option has really not made much of a dent in what's going on.

The Mérida Initiative is something that was put together a few years ago. It is about \$1.6 to \$1.7 billion that we are putting into training Mexican forces and also providing them with military tech equipment to help them with the war. But the Mérida Initiative has been plagued with problems since the beginning. Initially there were human rights caveats attached to it, because there were many human rights abuse allegations being made against the Mexican army. They were very, very upset about that, so eventually the State Department backed off.

But it was taking months and months. The money was coming out of the Mérida Initiative. It was just an absolute trickle because it was so plagued with red tape. Also there are no benchmarks in the Mérida Initiative. There are no benchmarks for success. There are no caveats for cutting off the money if there are not results by a certain amount of time. So the government accountability office completely ripped the Mérida Initiative to

shreds not that long ago. Now they are working on “beyond Mérida”; trying to recraft it. Trying to take a look at how they can reprioritize it. But it definitely needs a lot of fixing.

Some solutions to take a look at on both sides of the border: Right now, the Mexican government and the U.S. government are regarding the cartels as organized crime groups. They have evolved well beyond just Mafia groups. They are not terrorist organizations in the pure sense. They are not an insurgency in a pure sense. However, they exhibit characteristics of organized crime, of insurgencies and of terrorist groups. There needs to be some kind of regard for them as hybrid organizations – as a criminal insurgency – because I feel right now we are bringing a knife to a gun fight.

The tools that we are using against them are tools that are designed to deal with gangs and just other criminals. They have evolved well beyond that level.

Going after the money? Going after money-laundering activity in Mexico has been very challenging. President Calderón has tried to initiate legislation to make Mexico’s weak money laundering laws a lot tougher, but it’s hard. There is a lot of NARCO money being injected into the Mexican economy. Some estimates say that it is as much as three percent of Mexico’s GDP that is coming in from drug money. It’s extraordinarily difficult to estimate. Anything in the black market is really hard to estimate. However, some politicians believe that it’s cutting off Mexico’s nose to spite its face to really, really aggressively go after it, considering the hardships that Mexico’s economy is going through, just like ours. There is some effort to make those anti-money laundering laws a little bit stronger.

Better resource allocation. More is not necessarily better. Secretary Napolitano gets on TV and in the news pretty frequently to say that we’re

sending hundreds of million dollars; thousands of Border Patrol agents to the border. But if they are not being sent to the places where they are needed the most, or the right places, then it doesn't really accomplish much. There needs to be a comprehensive "border threat strategy and assessment" to find out where the threats are the most and where those people and where that money is needed the most. Right now that doesn't exist.

Taking a look at decriminalization – California, I gotta tell you, I was really, really surprised that Proposition 19 didn't pass. I was *really* surprised. I know it missed by only a few percentage points, but California would make a really great test bed for how legalization of Marijuana might impact the drug war. But it's still kind of up in the air.

Some cartels, particularly Los Zetas, are only making half of their money from drugs right now. They are involved in kidnapping for ransom, extortion, in some cases piracy of DVDs, CDs, software, fuel theft, cattle rustling, illegal mining operations. You name it they're involved in it if you can make money from it. Of the drugs, some experts and institutes estimate that only 25% of their drug profits are coming from marijuana. So if you were to decriminalize or legalize marijuana here, it's debatable how much of a real negative impact that might have on cartel profits. So that's still kind of up in the air.

So some final conclusions: The drug war cannot be won, it can only be managed. I get that question all of the time. Can the drug war be won? Are we winning? Are we losing? And it's really frustrating to hear that kind of language because this isn't the Civil War. This isn't World War II. There are no clear sides. If this were a winning/losing proposition, who could possibly raise the white flag and surrender? The cartels are amorphous. They are constantly splitting; joining; getting back together; breaking up into different factions. So it just can't happen.

What I mean by “being managed” is: we all enjoy a great degree of freedom and safety here in the United States, in that we can go to work every day. We can take our kids to school. We can go to the supermarket. We can vote in elections. And we can do that without the fear of getting kidnapped or getting shot or getting caught in some kind of crossfire because we’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. A good chunk of Mexican citizens cannot do that.

There was a Pew Research Center poll that said 44% of Mexicans have changed the way that they live their daily lives as a result of the drug war. In some parts of Mexico, people won’t go to certain restaurants anymore because the NARCOS tend to go to those restaurants to eat. Many of them won’t go out at night anymore. Many of them are afraid to take their kids to school because bodies were dumped in front of their kid’s elementary school a few weeks back. And they are afraid to do some of the most basic things that you and I take for granted. And until that can happen in Mexico, I don’t think that we’re seeing a true managing of the situation there.

The Mexican Government is running out of options. The strategy has been in place for five years and it is an election year next year. Some people think that if the PRI comes back into office, all of the sudden things will go back to the way they were. There will be a nice little agreement. They’ll pull the military out and then things will quiet down. The problem is that in the old days of the PRI the government was in charge of the cartels and could actually tell them what to do. Now the cartels are telling the government, in some cases, what to do.

There is no benefit to the cartels whatsoever to engage in any kind of agreement with the government because what they want to do, they are pretty much able to do that with impunity in several parts of the country right now.

Perhaps creating – allowing to be created – one or two mega-cartels. Perhaps the right strategy is to go after the smaller mini cartels; the weaker cartels, and allow two big ones to flourish. So you'd only have two cartels fighting each other. The government is fighting only against two mega-cartels. Maybe that's the solution. Maybe that is what Calderón is trying to do, and just nobody really knows about it. Perhaps that's one way to go.

Corruption issues – a lot of people don't understand the role that corruption plays in all of Latin America. It goes back hundreds and hundreds of years to before colonization, back to the Spanish Crown. It is regarded very differently in Latin America than it is here. It is socially acceptable in most places, whereas here it's not. It keeps the machine oiled. Public wages are very low in most parts of Latin America so through bribery; through corruption; through the money that kind of trickles down through everybody's pockets and the way that some things work, it keeps the people happy. It keeps them from revolting, and it allows people to live; to have a home; to have a car; to go buy groceries.

But now, that balance has been tipped, so corruption has taken on a very different face. The Mexican people, in many cases, no longer have faith that their government can protect them; that their police can protect them, and that has become one of the biggest challenges.

Fighting the drug war from the demand side – obviously the two biggest things that fuel the drug war are American demand for drugs and the fact that those drugs are illegal. So if we try to curb American drug use, what is the practicality of that? I try to compare. Trying to eliminate or significantly reduce corruption in Mexico is akin to trying to significantly reduce or eliminate the demand for illegal drugs in the United States. That is not really practical, and thinking that the United States government is going to completely legalize all drugs in the United States any time soon is also a pipe

dream. Whether it's the right thing or the wrong thing to do, I am on the fence about that. But neither one of those things is going to happen any time soon. So fighting it from the demand side is not realistic.

So why should we care? According to the National Drug Intelligence Center's 2011 report, which came out a couple of months ago, the cartels have a presence in some way, shape or form, or proxy in over one thousand U.S. cities. They are responsible for 90% of the drugs being used by American drug users – ninety percent of the drugs. So pretty much anywhere there is a demand for illegal drugs in the United States, the cartels have some level of control there.

They have hubs in Denver; in Houston; St. Louis; Chicago; Detroit; Miami; New York; Atlanta. So this is not just a southwest border problem. They are transporting it on the highways throughout the country. They're stashing it in safe houses in suburban communities, and they are using U.S.-based gangs – mostly African American and Hispanic gangs – to distribute those drugs on the street. That's one way to look at it.

Also, another reason to care: we have an enormous, enormous Mexican-American community in the United States – all over the country. And it's very likely that they have family members still in Mexico. And there's a pretty good chance that they have a family member that has been directly affected by the drug war. Anytime that I travel anywhere and I see somebody – whether they're working in a restaurant; in a hotel; I am waiting in line somewhere – and I start talking to somebody, because I speak Spanish, I will ask them where they are from.

I challenge you all to do this same in your communities. If you have a friend or you know somebody or you come across somebody that's from Mexico, ask them from what part of Mexico they are from. Google it; find out where

they're from. Ask them if they have a family member or they've been affected by the violence somehow. I would not be surprised if that person told you, "Yes, I have a cousin; I have a friend; I have a friend's uncle, who was kidnapped; who was threatened; who has a business; who's being extorted." This is common, and these are people who are an intrinsic part of our communities.

This is just not Mexico's drug war. This is our drug war, and we are in this fight together. It's very important for us to realize that. We have to make the drug war a priority. In January, during the State of Union Address, President Obama did not mention the drug war once. He did not mention Mexico once. In the GOP debates right now, they are only mentioning border security for a very short amount of time, using that as a springboard to talk about immigration, and not really focusing on solid solutions for border security.

That tells me that, as a government and as a country, the drug war and what is going on in Mexico is not a top priority. Before we are going to see any real solutions; any real changes in our policy and any real progress, we need to make the border and what's going on in Mexico a top priority, so that we can prevent that coming invasion.

Thank you very much for your attention, and I will take questions.

www.lawac.org

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.