



Texas-Mexico Borderlands: The Slide Toward Chaos

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Texas-Mexico Borderlands: The Slide Toward Chaos

Dudley Althaus

Not so very long ago, the (U.S.-Mexico) border was widely considered a region, not a rampart. Academics studied the border's folklore, culture, food, and language as if they were of a separate nation more in tune with itself than the U.S. and Mexican heartlands. "One River, One Country" a 1986 PBS documentary surmised.

How quaint that notion seems today.

Americans' anger over illegal immigration, Mexico's gangland narcotics wars, and the unchecked population growth spawned by Mexican cities' industrialization have transformed the borderlands. They are now a fractured fringe, both frightening and frightened.

Looming steel fences and sophisticated electronic detection devices stand watch on a third of the 2,000-mile long U.S. side. A dramatically enhanced Border Patrol seems omnipresent even in remote deserts of West Texas and Arizona.

As the United States has buttoned up, Mexico's border communities have melted down. Gangland wars consume Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, and smaller cities. Extortion is rampant, kidnapping on the rise. Untold thousands of middle class and wealthy Mexicans lucky enough to hold U.S. visas are moving to the United States. Mexican border businesses that long catered to partying, shopping, or treatment-seeking Americans are withering.

Of course, the border has always been a little bit dangerous, seedy and edgy. That's the nature of borders most everywhere, especially those between such disparate cultures and economies as Mexico and the United States.

Truth be told, its edginess is what brought me to the border as a fledgling reporter 25 years ago. It's the magnet that drew a lot of non-natives there over the years.

But the seediness and danger of decades past -- as bad as things could sometimes get -- seem downright sepia-toned and folkloric amid the carnage today. There's nothing tequila-swilling exotic

about the Mexican cities' lawlessness.

Beheadings, kidnappings, extortions, and murder all have reached a level not seen since the 1910 Revolution, if ever. The criminality has gripped cities that have otherwise been shedding the extreme poverty and shabbiness that most people might associate with the phrase "border town."

Fortified with industry and trade, Mexico's border cities appear quite wealthy to me these days, a far cry from those I knew as a young reporter in the 1980s. Gated communities of large homes that wouldn't be out of place in Houston, Dallas, or Austin spread out to the south and along the Rio Grande. Gleaming U.S.-based pub and restaurant chains, hotels, and markets anchor boulevards and shopping centers.

But that modern veneer renders the violence gripping the border all the more jarring.

Police in January 2004 dug up the bodies of 11 men who had been tortured, murdered, and buried by gangsters in a southside Juarez backyard. The killing field belonged to a row house in a middle class neighborhood of van-driving soccer moms, just blocks from a modern high rise hotel. The backyard was clearly visible from the upstairs windows of the adjoining houses. But the killing went on for months before it was ended by an informant's tip to U.S. police.

When I began covering Matamoros for the Brownsville Herald in January 1984 the city already had been suffering a nearly year-long gangland war. Scores of bodies had been dumped in the streets, the Rio Grande, and the sorghum fields outside town.

Smugglers who had long made their livings trafficking marijuana, stolen cars, textiles, and machinery were squabbling over the marketing rights of a great new product: cocaine.

The seizure of a single kilo of the narcotic powder at Brownsville's downtown bridge made

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front page news in the Herald a few months after I arrived. Just five years later, U.S. federal agents seized 19 tons of cocaine from a stash house in Harlingen, just up the road from Brownsville.

My first big story as a reporter was mobster Juan Garcia Abrego's killing of a rival who was recovering in a downtown Matamoros clinic from an earlier assassination attempt. Attacking at sunrise in commando style that has become all too familiar on the border now, the killers gunned down everyone in the clinic along with their target.

Garcia Abrego went on to traffic many tons of cocaine to U.S. consumers, founding the so-called Gulf Cartel in the process. That cartel and its hired guns, the Zetas, now get blamed for much of the violence rattling the cities bordering South Texas and areas deep inside Mexico.

But the Gulf Cartel is only one of several who now divide Mexico into fiefdom's warring with one another and with local, state, and federal authorities. The violence killed nearly 6,300 people last year and another 1,000 in the past two months alone.

When I started covering Mexico in the mid-1980s, the nation numbered 69 million souls. Today that figure stands at nearly 110 million, a nearly 60 percent increase in just 23 years. As the population exploded, the decrepit political and economic systems that kept nearly 30 million impoverished Mexicans on the land fell apart in the 1990s. Millions have migrated from the countryside since, many heading for the United States -- angering so many Americans. Still more poured into Mexican cities, many of them ending up on the border.

But a dignified future has eluded many who washed up on the line. For all the wealth they've generated, the foreign-owned assembly plants -- the maquiladoras -- pay about the same weekly wage as they did in the 1980s.

Most workers are lucky to take home little more \$50 a week, in places where a gallon of milk costs as much as it does in Texas and gasoline costs more. Turnover is high on the assembly lines, and

factories prefer young, unmarried, and childless women for many of the jobs.

A recent article in the Juarez press cited estimates that as much as 40 percent of the city's young men are neither employed nor in school. Police have identified some 500 street gangs in the city.

Crack cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs sell briskly in the city's poor neighborhoods. Entire families have taken up the trade. Many of the killings today are attributed to the fight for that local market, not international smuggling routes. That border city and others like it have become "a scream that disturbs the sleep of the rulers in their various palaces," Tucson writer Charles Bowden put it in his book *Juarez: the Laboratory of Our Future*. He also calls Juarez "A new and invigorating charnel house erected by a dying order.

Some thought the book far too pessimistic when it came out in 1998, despite that decade's wave of feminicides staining Juarez's name. Now Bowden seems both prescient and a little short of the mark.

Things have gotten so much worse, and not just in Juarez.

Mexican troops and federal police in February 2008 battled gangsters in an upper middle class neighborhood in Reynosa, killing at least six of them. The shootout raged for more than two hours outside the low walls of a primary school, where teachers struggled to keep 1,000 first graders on the classroom floors and out of harm's way.

"This ain't ever going to end," one homeowner told me wearily in lightly accented English, as he gave a tour of his three-story home, which had been riddled with hundreds of bullets in that shootout. "Tell me how it can end."