

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Inordinate wealth gives the large trafficking organizations an almost unlimited capacity to corrupt. In many ways, they are a less obvious threat to democratic government than many insurgent movements. Guerrilla armies or terrorist organizations openly seek to topple and replace governments through overt violence. The drug syndicates only want to manipulate governments to their advantage and guarantee themselves a secure operating environment. They do so by co-opting key officials. A real fear of democratic leaders should be that one day the drug trade might take *de facto* control of a country by putting a majority of elected officials, including the president, directly or indirectly, on its payroll. Though it has yet to happen, there have been some disquieting near misses.

U.S. Department of State and Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotic Control Strategy Report, 1997*. March, 1998.

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THE COUNTRY FORMERLY KNOWN AS MEXICO.

Once upon a time, there was a country called Austria-Hungary. Once upon a time, there was a country called Yugoslavia. Once upon a time, there was a country called Czechoslovakia. Once upon a time, there was a country called India, but no country called Pakistan. Once upon a time . . . well . . . you get the point. Maps change. Boundaries are redrawn. Countries disappear. Others are fabricated out of whole cloth.

Fortunately – at least for those of us in this country – over the last century-and-a-half, the bulk of this boundary redrawing has taken place far away, outside of the Western hemisphere. We would argue that this is, in large part, a consequence of the Monroe Doctrine.

Unfortunately, despite the geographical remoteness of the more recent alterations, the United States has not been unaffected by these changes. Indeed, as it turns out, when cartographic revisions take place, both the causes and the effects tend to be global, which is to say that everyone everywhere feels the pain.

“Events” like World War I and World War II, to name just two examples, spring to mind. But they are hardly the only instances. The partition of India claimed at least half-a-million lives and created some 25 million refugees; it also spawned three major wars and one minor war to date. The breakup of Yugoslavia precipitated mass slaughter, attempted genocide, and a handful of wars, technically still ongoing. And like the World Wars, the conflicts in the collapse of the Balkans eventually required the intervention of American troops.

Indeed, as far as we can tell, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia – into its Czech and Slovak components – is the exception, the rare case in which the rewriting of global maps took place against a peaceful backdrop. As a rule, the collapse of nations and the rise of superstates almost always carry serious geopolitical risks, not the least of which are to life and limb.

Given all of this, the question arises, “What would be the consequences of a similar national collapse closer to home?” At this nation’s backdoor, perhaps? If, say, the 14th largest nation in the world, with the 11th largest population, were simply to crumple and were thus to heave a massive percentage of its roughly 111 million residents toward the United States as refugees. How badly would that screw up the world? How badly would that screw up this nation? And what if it happened with a political neophyte and multiculti extremist in the White House?

Sound far-fetched? Well, yes. At least we hope it is. But sadly, we’re not sure, not by a long shot. If anything, we are less confident in the implausibility of such a scenario today than we were yesterday. And yesterday, we were less confident than we were the day before. And the day before, we were less confident that we were last year.

And how did we feel last year? Funny you should ask. Just over a year ago, in a March 30 piece entitled “Of Black Swans and Drug Cartels,” we wrote the following:

For those of you who have been living in a cave, it turns out that one of the two closest neighbors and trading partners of the United States is, in fact, a failed state, a nation in name only, now governed, if that is the right word, by a handful of brutal drug cartels. The “official” position of the Obama administration is that Mexico is not a failed state and is not in danger of becoming one. Yet

both the conditions on the ground and the federal government’s own behavior tend to belie that assessment.

On February 20th [2009], the State Department issued a travel warning for Americans visiting Mexico, noting that the level of violence has increased considerably. Shortly thereafter, State coordinated efforts with universities to warn spring breaking college students about the risks of traveling south of the border. And then, just last week, First Observer, “a trucking security program funded by a Department of Homeland Security grant,” issued an alert for truckers operating *in the United States*, but near the Mexican border, warning that “violence amongst Mexican drug cartels in the border states, on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border, has exponentially increased in the past year.” According to the *Washington Times*, “Sterline Payne, a spokeswoman for the Transportation Security Administration, said that the agency agreed with [First Observer’s] assessment.”

In the year since, nothing has changed in Mexico. Or at least, nothing has changed for the better. The drug cartels are still waging war with each other and with the government. And in this latter fight, the cartels are still winning. Average Mexicans are still being slaughtered or kidnapped at an alarming rate, and the violence continues to spill across the border. The only difference from last year is that, if anything, the conditions in Mexico have grown worse and may well soon come to a head.

Consider the following two stories, both from the last two weeks, and both demonstrating rather conclusively that the Mexican government no longer has control of the country, that the “nation” of Mexico no longer exists in anything but name. The first comes from Fox News, and though it is dated April 1, it is no joke:

For decades, immigrants coming from Mexico were denied asylum because Mexico was a stable and relatively peaceful democracy. But that is changing now.

Last week, at least 30 Mexicans from the town of El Porvenir walked to the border crossing post at Fort Hancock, Texas, and asked for political asylum. Ordinarily, their claim would be denied as groundless, and they would be turned back. Instead, they were taken to El Paso, where they expect to have their cases heard.

No one doubts that they have a strong claim. Their town on the Mexican side of the border is under siege by one or more drug cartels battling for control of the key border crossing. According to Mike Doyle, the chief deputy sheriff of Hudspeth County, Texas, one of the cartels has ordered all residents of the town of 10,000 to abandon the city within the next month.

“They came in and put up a sign in the plaza telling everyone to leave or pay with their own blood,” Doyle said. Since then there has been a steady stream of El Porvenir residents seeking safety on the American side of the border, both legally and illegally. Among them are the 30 who are seeking political asylum.

In recent days the situation in the impoverished, dusty border town has grown worse. According to Jose Franco, the superintendent of schools in Fort Hancock, the cartels have threatened to execute children in school unless parents pay 5000 pesos in protection money.

And on Wednesday night, according to Doyle, several houses in El Porvenir were set on fire, and there were reports of cars loaded with furniture leaving the town.

Authorities fear that an incident might spark a mass exodus by the residents of El Porvenir that might cause them all to surge across the border at once.

We’re not sure which frightens us more: the possibility of a mass migration into the United States, with the “refugees” claiming political asylum; or the fact that the decision on asylum will, ultimately, come from the State Department, through the Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. What that means is that the final say will belong to Hillary Clinton, whose unpredictability, self-absorption, and political ambitions are surpassed only by her husband’s.

The second story comes from the *Los Angeles Times* and is dated April 2. If anything, it is even more disturbing than the previous one. To wit:

Drug traffickers fighting to control northern Mexico have turned their guns and grenades on the Mexican army, authorities said, in an apparent escalation of warfare that played out across multiple cities in two border states.

In coordinated attacks, gunmen in armored cars and equipped with grenade launchers fought army troops this week and attempted to trap some of them in two military bases by cutting off access and blocking highways, a new tactic by Mexico’s organized criminals.

In taking such aggressive action, the traffickers have shown that they are not reluctant to challenge the army head-on

and that they possess good intelligence on where the army is, how it moves and when it operates . . .

“This really speaks to the incredible organization and firepower that the drug-trafficking organizations have managed to muster,” said Tony Payan, a border expert at the University of Texas at El Paso. “These are organizations that are flexible, supple and quick to react and adapt. They no doubt represent a challenge to the Mexican state.”

That last bit’s the best part of it (and by “best,” of course, we mean “worst”): “They no doubt represent a challenge to the Mexican state.” We couldn’t help but notice that professor Payan didn’t say that they represent a challenge to the Mexican “government.” That’s likely because Payan is not an idiot and knows that the Mexican government is part of the problem and will never be part of the solution. One would be hard-pressed to find a more mobbed-up, corrupt government in the Western hemisphere. Where do we suppose that the drug mobs get that “good intelligence” that helps them meet and beat the flipping Mexican army?

All that said, Payan is wrong about the “challenge” to the Mexican state. The Mexican state is done; it’s over. That country no longer exists as even a nominal polity. Director of National Intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair can insist all he wants – as he did last March – that Mexico is not a failed state and is in no danger of becoming one. But he is wrong.

As things stand today, it is all but certain that the drug war violence will either get worse, which would lead the formal collapse of the Mexican state, or it will remain as it is, which carries its own risks. In any case, there is almost no chance that the violence will abate, at least not until one cartel asserts its supremacy and becomes a *de facto* state.

If the violence increases, the United States will be left with three likely options. The first, which might be the most productive, is also the least likely. President Obama, the peace-lovin’ man, could send American troops to quell the violence, to succeed where Mexican troops have thus far failed. This would require serious guts on the President’s part, which, of course, is why we assume it is unlikely.

Not that such a course would be particularly easy. Any use of American troops carries serious operational risks in addition to the obvious geo- and domestic political hazards. Who wants to fight on behalf of and in conjunction with a government that is corrupt and untrustworthy? As we should have learned in Vietnam and should be relearning in Afghanistan, untrustworthy partners make for American casualties. No one wants that, not least the Commander-in-Chief. Body bags in the war on terror is one thing; body bags in the war on drugs would be something else altogether and far harder to justify politically.

A second option would be to use the resources of this nation actually to defend its borders, a novel concept, we admit. If this country truly wants to prevent the consequences of Mexico’s drug wars – violence and refugees – from spilling over the border, then defending the border, with force if necessary, is an obvious answer. So obvious, in fact, that there is no chance that any American politician would ever engage such plans.

To defend the border would be to appear insensitive – insensitive to immigrants; insensitive to Latino voters in general; insensitive to potential refugees, who would be left with no options and would therefore likely be caught in the literal crossfire. A political crisis compounded by a potential humanitarian crisis is hardly on any politicians’ wish list.

A last option would be to deal with the crisis as it develops, essentially turning the Southern border of the United States into a giant refugee camp. If political asylum is granted to the erstwhile residents of El Porvenir, then this is the future, whether anyone likes it or not.

As the blogger ZenPundit has noted, the “cancer of lawlessness” in Mexico continues to “gain control like a reverse ‘Oil Spot Strategy,’” which is to say that it is mimicking the American strategy in Iraq, only in reverse. In Iraq, the strategy has been to establish bases of security and to use those “spots” to spread security outward, like the expansion of an oil stain. In Mexico, obviously, “violence” is substituted for “security” and with the same effect and the opposite outcome. Before long, the entire nation will be engulfed in chaos, if it’s not already, that is.

We have been preaching the gospel on Mexico for more than a decade now, warning that eventually the massive amount of wealth and massive corruption generated by the drug trade would eventually spill over into “civilized” society. We may be wrong about the specific timing of that “eventually,” and this crisis may subside before it fully crosses the border. But we doubt seriously that we are wrong about the long-term prognosis.

The drug trade in Mexico continues to be a serious threat – to Mexico, to the United States, to the “global community,” and, most notably, to average Mexicans wishing simply to live their lives, raise their families, and subsist in peace. Is it any wonder that so many continue to cross the border looking for a better life, even as the United States struggles to regain its economic footing? Wouldn’t you?

As we have noted before, President Obama seems determined at some point this year to tackle the issue of “comprehensive immigration reform.” Generally speaking, we loathe any legislative initiative that purports to be “comprehensive” or contains the word “reform.” And this one is no exception. Still, we might be willing to change our minds if the President would, as a gesture of good faith and honesty, begin the process by calling the mapmakers together and figuring out what to do with the country formerly known as Mexico.

KARZAI LIKE A FOX.

Have you heard? Hamid Karzai, the President of Afghanistan and George W. Bush’s hand-picked post-Taliban Pashtun savior, is on drugs, probably heroin. Or maybe he’s just . . . well . . . a little “eccentric.” And by “eccentric,” of course, we mean totally and incurably insane. Either way, the guy is way, way out there.

How do we know this? Well, we heard it from respected diplomatic sources.

Okay, Okay. Not so much from “respected” diplomatic sources, but from diplomatic sources nonetheless. And this being the age of Obama, diplomats are near-kings. And certainly, American diplomats are smarter, sweeter, cleaner, and more attractive than at any point in the nation’s history, which means that they are also more trustworthy. Right?

Now, never you mind the fact that the diplomat in question here, the man who said that Karzai might have “a certain fondness for some of Afghanistan’s most profitable exports,” is Peter Galbraith, the former UN special envoy to Afghanistan and a former foreign affairs advisor to Senator John Kerry and Vice President Joe Biden. And never you mind the fact that, prior to this revelation, Galbraith was best known for being the child of someone famous and the guy who was “smart” enough to make a killing from the “advice” he gave the Kurds in the post-Saddam era.

None of that is important, you see. What really matters here is that Karzai is a bad egg, a corrupt and mendacious phony who, as president of Afghanistan, has the unmitigated gall not to place the interests of the Obama administration above his own or those of his country. The nerve! Heck, if you don’t believe Galbraith, you need look no further than The Big Man himself. After all, TBM (Obama) just flew all the way to Kabul just to give Karzai a half-hour stern talking to. That’s an awful lot of attention from the world’s most powerful (and wonderful) man. Why would Karzai merit such special consideration if he weren’t really and truly a bad, bad man?

To be fair, Karzai has been a genuine pain in the backside of late. And, more to the point, he all but certainly is among the most corrupt national leaders in the world – though that appears to be a fundamental condition for high office in the Middle East and environs. Karzai, apparently unhappy about having been chewed out by Obama, actually threatened last week to join the Taliban. And if we recall correctly, they're the guys our boys and girls are over there to fight, aren't they? Karzai's behavior has been so quarrelsome lately that even Tony Blankley, as staunch a conservative as there is in the newspaper business, suggested that either Karzai should be replaced or "we ought to get out before more of our troops get killed." That's tough talk indeed.

Unfortunately for the Obama crowd, Blankley didn't exactly say that Karzai should be replaced because he is a Taliban-supporting, poppy-popping, aid-embezzling nogoodnik. He said that Karzai should be replaced because he is no longer effective or reliable, having been kicked around pretty severely during the past few months.

Blankley notes that the Obama administration has, within the past couple of weeks, repeatedly called Karzai unreliable, imposed impossible timelines and restrictions upon him, and leaked (to *The New York Times*, natch) allegations that Karzai's brother (Amed Wali Karzai) is not only a big-shot drug smuggler but also a longtime CIA "undercover asset." As Blankley put it, "The Obama administration has publicly humiliated and undercut our 'local partner' to the extent that we can no longer influence or improve him."

This, of course, is an all too familiar tale. That's how the master-diplomats in the Obama administration treat their charges: they humiliate and belittle their allies and flatter and fawn over their enemies. We don't suppose that Hamid Karzai and Benjamin Netanyahu have a great deal in common, but there's no question that they could while away the hours swapping stories about the Obama team's approach to "diplomacy."

Still, we're not sure that we'd blame Karzai's behavior on the Obama administration's treatment of him, at least not exclusively. Don't get us wrong, we're all too willing to dogpile the Obama folks when they've screwed up or done something stupid. But in this case, we're not sure that they've done something stupid. Or more accurately, we guess, we're not sure that the something stupid they've done is what is motivating Karzai.

It's not what Obama has done that's relevant here. It's who he is.

Think about it this way for a minute: If you were the president of Afghanistan and you therefore had to figure out how best to protect your job, protect your life, and protect your people, with whom would you choose to take up sides, the guy who has promised that he will use the world's most powerful military to defend your country, but only for the next 18 months, or the guy who is on the verge of acquiring his very own nuclear bomb and thus on the verge of becoming the regional hegemon?

Let us put it another way. Why do you think that Karzai responded to Obama's threats and his administration's petty insults by phoning up Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and asking him over for dinner and a couple rounds of "death to the Great Satan"?

As we noted last week, Obama has taken on all the appearances of a man with no interest whatsoever in trying to stop the Mullahs from getting a bomb. Sure, he still occasionally tries to talk tough. But even his smacktalk sounds less than heartfelt. He may want to rid the world of nukes, but even along those lines, he sounds far more interested in ridding the world of American nukes than Iranian ones.

Obama is, in short, the weak horse. This isn't to say that he couldn't be a strong horse if he wanted to be. But he doesn't want to be. He wants to transform the country, *this* country. Transforming other countries is work better left to cowboys and neocons. Obama's job, as he sees it, is to make this country a better place, and we use the word "better" here advisedly.

All of this foreign policy garbage just gets in the way of Obama's real ambitions. In a very real sense, Obama is the mirror image of George H.W. Bush, who was the foreign policy whiz kid but couldn't bring himself to give a tinker's damn about domestic policy. Obama, like the elder Bush, goes through the motions, of course, but anyone who is paying even the remotest attention knows that his heart isn't in it. He wants to be spreading the wealth around, you see, not fighting the Taliban or bombing the Mullahs. Waging war isn't what he signed up for.

And that leaves us asking again the question: If you were Hamid Karzai, in whom would you put your faith?

More to the point, after you'd made your choice, why would you put up with the petty and self-serving jibes of the date you'd just jilted?

Maybe Hamid Karzai does have a drug problem. Maybe he does have a mental problem. Or two. Maybe he is corrupt and unreliable.

But none of that means that he doesn't also share the universal preference for the strong horse over the weak horse.

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