

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Cota Meza

War against Mexico's Army

The U.S. campaign to discredit, then dismantle, Mexico's Armed Forces fits into the free-trade conspiracy.

A Mexican Army brigade engaged in a bloody shootout with a commando unit of the Judicial Police, which had reportedly been pursuing a planeload of drug traffickers. The confusing events occurred Nov. 7 on a clandestine airstrip on the outskirts of Tlalixcoyan, a small town in Veracruz in Mexico's southeast. Seven policemen died, apparently shot by the soldiers, along with one soldier who fell in the skirmish. The drug traffickers are alleged to have escaped under Army protection.

As if the events aren't complicated enough, Mexican authorities are planning to try to clarify the incident by relying on a video film that was taken by agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, who were passing over the scene in another airplane at the time. It is believed that the Mexican judicial police involved were undergoing training by the DEA agents.

The Dec. 4 edition of the magazine *Siempre!* declared in an editorial that "the Veracruz incident among drug traffickers, judicial police, and elements of the Mexican Army exposes not only the magnitude of the drug trade in the area, but also the close vigilance and cynical interference by our neighbor in Mexico's internal affairs. Once again, it was the U.S. press which assumed the role of pronouncing sentence against a national institution, accusing the Mexican Army of assassination, in a global, Manichean way, as if its behavior were an obstacle to the fight against drugs."

The Nov. 27 *Washington Post*, in an article by foreign correspondent

Edward Cody, claimed that the incident at Tlalixcoyan "revives the ghost of Mexican Army involvement in cocaine smuggling from Colombia to the United States." The article cited an aide to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari saying that the President would take on the problem "if an investigation indicated the involvement of the Army in smuggling operations in Mexico."

It is well known that the drug trade has infiltrated not only the ranks of Mexico's judicial police and military, but also of the world of politics and finance, where the drug cartels receive "protection" and are given access to money-laundering mechanisms. This corruption, however, is hardly exclusive to Mexico, but is unhappily pervasive throughout the world. The U.S. is a particularly egregious case, where confessed drug traffickers are protected, as long as they play by the rules established for the government's political interests.

In Mexican political and media circles, commentaries abound suggesting that President Salinas might use the incident to designate a civilian to head the Defense Ministry, thus advancing the policies of the U.S. State and Defense Departments in forcing the "demilitarization" of the continent's armies. Others speak of a conflict within the Mexican Army command, not only regarding the fight against drugs but also in other areas of national strategic security.

A juridical battle has also erupted over the legitimacy of Army participation in the war on drugs. While the Attorney General's office and its judi-

cial police are pursuing the war with both repressive and prosecutorial powers, the Armed Forces are fighting drugs under the concept of "a peacetime war inside Mexican territory." Under this definition, the Army is obliged to combat traffickers, but is not empowered to try them.

This discrepancy is now being presented—along with "evidence" provided by a foreign nation—as the basis for placing the Mexican Armed Forces, *as an institution*, in the dock, to be judged by civilian law and by the norms of the National Human Rights Commission, which has been designated by the federal government as an "impartial investigator" of the facts.

The *summary judgment* that would be issued by the United States against the Mexican Armed Forces, one of the country's institutional pillars, has nothing to do with White House interest in combatting the drug trade. They want to destroy the Mexican Army for other reasons.

Constitutionally, the Mexican Army, Air Force, and Navy are the official guardians of the country's territory, natural resources, and vital and strategic industrial capabilities, including Mexico's oil fields and the installations of the state oil company Pemex.

Given that control of Mexico's oil is a principal objective of the Bush administration known as the North American Free Trade Agreement, the dismantling of Mexico's armed protection is a crucial first step toward that goal. Indeed, one of the "hypotheses of war" which the Mexican Armed Forces are obliged to consider, is an armed conflict with the United States over oil reserves.

With the incidents in Veracruz and open U.S. involvement in the internal affairs of Mexico, that "hypothesis of war" is on course—if still only at the level of irregular warfare.