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## **The Mexican Military Approaches the 21st Century: Coping with a New World Order**

Stephen J. Wager LTC

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**THE MEXICAN MILITARY APPROACHES THE 21ST CENTURY:  
COPING WITH A NEW WORLD ORDER**

Stephen J. Wager

February 21, 1994

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## FOREWORD

In 1993, the Strategic Studies Institute and the University of Arizona cosponsored a conference on "Mexico Looks to the 21st Century: Change and Challenge." It brought together a distinguished group of academic and government specialists to discuss Mexico's future, particularly the changes likely to be brought about by the North American Free Trade Agreement and their implications for the United States. Participants made presentations on Mexico's political future, the borderlands, the environmental problem, migration, Mexico's civil society, the labor and women's movement, and the military. The conference was funded by the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Outreach Program, under the direction of Colonel John D. Auger, and the University of Arizona. It was organized by Dr. Edward J. Williams of the University of Arizona and Dr. Donald E. Schulz of the Strategic Studies Institute.

Of the papers presented at the meeting, the one that struck closest to the concerns of the U.S. Army was "The Mexican Military Approaches the 21st Century: Coping with a New World Order" by Lieutenant Colonel Stephen J. Wager of the U.S. Military Academy. The author's discussion of the roles and missions of the Mexican armed forces has special salience in this era of "alternative missions." Here is a classic case of a military institution whose principal missions of civic action and counternarcotics are those with which our own Army has had to deal in recent years. Colonel Wager's study provides a timely and instructive lesson on how our Mexican colleagues have wrestled with these challenges.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish this report as a contribution to understanding this important subject.

JOHN W. MOUNTCASTLE  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
Director, Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

LIEUTENANT COLONEL STEPHEN J. WAGER is an Associate Professor of History at the U.S. Military Academy. He has a Ph.D. from Stanford University where he did his dissertation on the Mexican military. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and *Hemisphere* and as chapters in Sergio Aguayo Quezada and Bruce Bagley's *En Busca de la Seguridad Perdida* and David Ronfeldt's *The Modern Mexican Military: A Reassessment*.

## THE MEXICAN MILITARY APPROACHES THE 21ST CENTURY: COPING WITH A NEW WORLD ORDER

### Introduction.

In speculating about the future of the Mexican military, a clear understanding of that institution's past can prove invaluable. As is the case with most institutions, the role of the military will evolve in some form from the missions it has performed in the past. The history of the army in the 20th century, like that of the nation in general, has centered first and foremost on the Mexican Revolution, which ravaged the country for 10 years (1910-20) and cost the lives of close to two million people. The army played a critical role in both the revolution and its outcome. It forged most of the political institutions that subsequently emerged and that provided Mexico with the relative economic and political stability that the nation has enjoyed since the 1920s.

Ironically, the country's political leaders--most of whom were military in the two decades immediately following the revolution--worked to eliminate the army's direct role in politics as a way of promoting stability. The formation of a dominant official political party in 1929 legitimized a formal role for the military in this *sui generis* political system. The founding of this predominant party, known today by the initials PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*), began the process of institutionalizing civilian political power.<sup>1</sup> The civilianization of power took away the army's direct role in political decisionmaking, and the country's new civilian leaders assigned the military the role of guarantor and protector of the overall system. Since the 1920s, the army hierarchy had begun to inculcate its younger officers with an ideology replete with values such as loyalty, a revolutionary heritage, and patriotism. That unique ideology contributed significantly to the enthusiastic acceptance by army leaders of their new mission, which the military has proudly and jealously guarded to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Historical events helped Mexico's new political elite consolidate its preeminent position. As early as 1940, the armed forces had begun to shift all their energies toward the traditional military functions of protecting the national sovereignty from a hostile enemy and preparing for war. In the aftermath of World War II, Mexico elected the first in an unbroken line of civilian presidents and dashed any military hopes of regaining political power. Consequently, the army turned its attention towards civic action and crisis management, where it has remained focused to the present day. As the year 2000 approaches, it is logical to draw on this history when considering the army's future missions, structure, and influence.

### The Role of the Mexican Army.

The Mexican army's mission has generally remained the same since the publication of the military's first organic law in 1926. The organic law, the legal *raison d'etre* of the institution, defined the army's mission as follows: "to defend the integrity and independence of the fatherland, to maintain the rule of the Constitution and its laws, and to conserve internal order."<sup>3</sup> That mission remained in effect, although it had been modified informally within the Defense Secretariat, until the publication of a new organic law in 1971. The new organic law eliminated the task of maintaining the rule of the Constitution and its laws and replaced it with a mission of aiding the civilian population in the case of public emergencies and helping with social projects that contribute to the overall progress of the nation.<sup>4</sup> This new code simply legalized the civic action role that the army had been performing as far back as the 1920s. A subsequent change to the organic law in 1986 added greater specificity to that civic action mission by subdividing it into three separate missions: (1) providing aid to the civilian population in case of public emergencies, (2) performing civic action and social works that contribute to the progress of the country, and (3) in the case of natural disasters, helping to maintain public order and providing support to the affected population and its property.<sup>5</sup>

These increases in the army's civic action role are unlikely to decrease in the near future. On the contrary, greater emphasis will be placed on it as the military moves into the next century. More specifically, the National Development Plans of both Presidents Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-88) and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) called upon the army to increase activities that relate directly to the welfare of the community.<sup>6</sup>

The army's future role in civic action grows clearer when examined in the overall context of Mexican national security. In 1989, Mexican and U.S. experts met in Mexico City to discuss the concept of Mexican national security. As a result, most of the Mexican analysts concluded that their top political leaders did not have a precise definition for national security. Instead, they argued that the Mexican government had long confused national security with internal security. They attributed this confusion to the fact that the powers of both the government and the nation have resided in one person, the President of the Republic. For that reason, Mexican presidents have been more attentive to internal security and have usually viewed the two concepts as synonymous. Such an approach historically<sup>7</sup> has helped to reinforce the government's control of the country.

Not surprisingly, the army has adopted a national security philosophy very similar to that practiced by top government leaders. In 1980, the then Secretary of National Defense (SECDEF), General Felix Galvan Lopez, defined national security as "the maintenance of social, economic and political equilibrium guaranteed by the armed forces."<sup>8</sup> The SECDEF's definition sounded

very much like internal security. Despite the growing debate over the meaning of national security and the formation of a National Security Cabinet in 1988,<sup>9</sup> the army most likely will continue to direct its attention to internal as opposed to national security. With the end of the cold war, the Mexican armed forces no longer feel themselves being squeezed between the United States and the former Soviet bloc. Reinforced in part by the current international situation and increased domestic tensions as a result of expanding political reform, the Mexican government continues to see the major threats to its stability emanating from within the country and not from some external source. Accepting such a premise, the Mexican army, in its role as guarantor of the political system, most likely will focus the brunt of its effort on internal security. Consequently, at times certain civic action tasks may be performed under the guise of national security.

Mexican army officers have been educated and trained to respect the country's revolutionary heritage and to attach special importance to nationalism and patriotism. These values have buttressed the army's civic action role for decades. Civic action has been the preferred role of the army's leadership because it has enhanced the institution's image among the Mexican people. Political leaders, however, have felt compelled to call upon the army for assistance in infrequent but highly volatile crises. Since the 1940s, a clever crafting of the military has insured compliance with the directives of the ruling elite, no matter how unpleasant those orders might be. This has led to the army's participation in crisis management, which has almost always marred its reputation. Nevertheless, because it has remained an integral part of the ruling system, the military has been unable to extricate itself from that mission. Through the years, the juxtaposed roles of civic action and crisis management have at times, to the chagrin of army leaders, impugned the military's image. In 1968, for instance, soldiers were transformed from patriotic nation-builders into the "butchers of Tlatelolco." Since the 1940s, there has been an underlying struggle within the institution to remain focused on civic action, while political leaders at times have felt the need to channel army efforts into crisis management.

For the most part, the military's active participation in crises has been fairly restricted over the past 50 years. The army has four general sets of defense plans, which carry the classifications of DN-I, DN-II, DN-III, and DN-IV. Plan DN-I encompasses war plans aimed at defending the nation against a foreign enemy. Plan DN-II focuses on eliminating internal security threats. DN-III provides for disaster relief. Recently, Plan DN-IV was added to organize and legitimize the army's role in the antidrug campaign.<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of World War II, Mexico's foreign policy, guided mainly by the principles of nonintervention, respect for self-determination, and a general disdain for military solutions



to international problems, has virtually eliminated foreign military involvement or membership in alliance systems. Not surprisingly, therefore, the army primarily has focused on preserving internal security. Political and military leaders have long associated civic action with the conservation of internal security. The army had been performing its traditional role of civic action, or *labor social* as Mexicans call it, when World War II forced the military back into what the Constitution of 1917 had assumed would be its principal role--namely, defending the nation against a foreign enemy. The execution of that task was an aberration. After the war, political leaders favored the army's resuming civic action tasks in hopes of distancing military officers from politics.<sup>11</sup>

The Mexican army has a rich tradition of assisting the civilian population. As far back as the early 1920s, the military engaged in such tasks as building roads, constructing irrigations works, and repairing railroad and telegraph lines. The 1926 organic law (*Ley Organica del Ejercito y la Armada*) formally made civic action a part of the army's mission. Article 81 provided for the use of military resources in the construction of communications networks and public works that had some correlation with the overall needs of the institution.<sup>12</sup> President Cardenas (1934-40) assigned the army a definite role in *forjando la patria* (nation-building) attempting to depoliticize it in the late 1930s. He envisioned the military as an instrument for expanding the central government's control throughout Mexico's more isolated regions. As an added advantage for political leaders, civic action kept officers busy, leaving them little time to mingle in politics. The Mexican military became an army of workers that plowed fields and built roads, and its size and organization were regulated accordingly.<sup>13</sup> By the 1940s, the formal adoption of this role had contributed substantially to the governing civilian coalition's ability gradually to edge the military out of the political limelight.

The Mexican Revolution was unique to the region, and the army's revolutionary heritage has given legitimacy to its civic action mission. The military has labored, especially in the country's more remote areas, to bring to fruition the revolutionary principles of economic and social justice that many patriots sacrificed their lives for during the revolution. Civic action programs have been the principal tools employed in the ongoing mission of maintaining internal peace.<sup>14</sup> The attention that the army has given to civic action has coincided neatly with its visibly nationalist philosophy.

The lack of a real external threat has also facilitated the army's commitment to civic action, and its social role has evolved since the 1920s, becoming dominant as the need for a strictly military role declined precipitously after World War II. In an interview with the author, a high-ranking politician from the administration of President Luis Echeverria (1970-76) underscored the significance of the army's civic action role

since the war. Instead of sustaining a static defense, he said, the military decided to act more dynamically to serve the Mexican people or, in his own words, "to preserve the peace."<sup>15</sup> That decision has brought a good deal of prestige to the army. The relatively small defense budgets resulting from the absence of an external menace and the implicit strategic defense by the United States have made the military's increasing focus on civic action a natural evolution.

In tracing the development of civic action programs, the army's priorities readily adapted to the changing complexion of the nation. As far back as the 1920s, the military devoted considerable effort to building roads and schools. By the late 1940s, road construction had been contracted out to civilians, with the army relegated to building secondary roads in outlying rural areas. While the military has continued to build small rural schools, its role in road construction and repair mostly has disappeared. By the 1970s, its literacy campaign, which had reached its apex in the 1940s and 1950s, had little impact within either the military or civilian society. In the 1950s, the army had a major role in the eradication of livestock plagues and epidemics. The natural evolution of modern medical science has eliminated that once vital mission. Social brigades that employed military medical personnel to vaccinate and offer basic medical care to individuals living in some of the country's more isolated regions reached their apex in the 1970s. Since then, their effect has been considerably reduced.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the gradual exclusion of certain civic action duties, the army has continued to perform many important roles in this area. Reforestation, a concern since the 1930s, gained new impetus in the late 1970s and 1980s because of growing national concern over environmental issues. In the Federal District alone, soldiers have planted over 11 million trees. One can assume that the army will retain an active role in improving the environment, and in more ways than simply planting trees. It is not far-fetched to assume that the military might eventually contribute to major environmental clean-up projects, of which Mexico has her share. In recent years, disaster relief has been a major responsibility. The army established a program for providing such relief in 1966. That mission became formal in the new organic law of 1971, and the military will work in this area well into the future. However, based on the events surrounding the relief dispensed during the 1985 earthquakes in Mexico City, it would appear that its contribution will be principally in rural areas where soldiers will be visible and not give the slightest hint of the imposition of martial law.

Protection of government installations also will carry over into the next century. For decades after the revolution, the army furnished escorts for railroads and government pay agents. By the 1970s, however, it had abandoned those duties and begun providing security at vital installations such as petroleum refineries and airports. Briefly, the army protected banks that had been

threatened by the short-lived guerrilla movement of that period. Finally, it became committed to a formal water distribution program in the early 1970s and has since been delivering potable water to many of the country's arid and drought-stricken regions. Both the security and water distribution duties will continue past the year 2000.<sup>17</sup>

The most visible role that the military will play currently and beyond is in the antidrug campaign. The significance that army leaders have attached to this mission can be seen in their decision to create a new category of defense plans (DN-IV) to deal with this problem. This task historically has been considered a civic action function, since it directly correlates to internal security. More recently, it has assumed political dimensions, given the expanding severity of the problem and the growing number of accusations of governmental corruption. This issue has also adversely affected Mexican relations with the United States. A general misconception has existed that the Mexican army did not get involved in antidrug operations until the United States began to pressure the Mexican government in the late 1960s. In fact, the opposite was the case because the army had reported drug eradication activities in the state of Durango as early as May 1946.<sup>18</sup> The following year, the U.S. Embassy received instructions from the State Department to urge the Mexican government to prevent the cultivation of illegal drugs. Ambassador Walter Thurston advised Washington that he had learned that the Mexican Attorney General's Office had been planning an extensive program to impede the cultivation of poppy fields. Mexico launched a major antidrug campaign in the northwestern part of the country in 1948, which entailed occasional raids and search-and-destroy missions into the heavy drug producing areas. Army personnel assisted agents from the Attorney General's Office in locating and eradicating poppy fields. The campaign has continued at different levels of intensity to the present.<sup>19</sup>

Although virtually nothing has been written about the army's role in the antinarcotics campaign during the 1950s and 1960s, the military worked with agents from the Attorney General's Office to locate and destroy drug crops in some of the more rugged regions. Official army sources reported the destruction of crops and the apprehension of traffickers in Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa during the 1950s.<sup>20</sup>

The military persevered in the antidrug campaign during the 1960s. Indeed, its operations expanded slightly. The army conducted joint search-and-destroy missions with agents from the Attorney General's Office in eight different states and increased the surface area coverage over that of the previous decade.<sup>21</sup> But despite some gradual improvement, the overall intensity of the effort remained relatively low until the 1970s.

Mexico's "Permanent Campaign Against Drug Trafficking" increased considerably towards the end of 1969 as a result of pressure from Washington. The United States implemented Operation

*Intercept* along the U.S.-Mexican border in October, ostensibly to induce Mexico into devoting more resources to antidrug activities. U.S. officials believed that the drug problem in the United States had reached crisis proportions, and they partially blamed Mexico as a major supplier. Operation *Intercept* prohibited Mexican goods from entering the United States as a means of coercing Mexico to destroy drug crops by chemical means. That policy eventually proved counterproductive, but the U.S. pressure did seem to affect the amount of resources that Mexico would later commit to the permanent antidrug campaign.<sup>22</sup> The new emphasis that Mexican officials placed on antidrug efforts had a major effect on the army's participation in the campaign. Military leaders, on orders from the President, immediately assigned more troops to the war against drugs.

Operation *Condor* proved to be the army's most prominent contribution to the permanent antidrug campaign. By the mid-1970s, growth in the drug trade forced the military to act more definitively against growers and traffickers. Shortly after becoming SECDEF in 1976, General Galvan Lopez directed the general staff to formulate a plan aimed at significantly curtailing drug cultivation in Mexico. The general staff of the National Defense Secretariat (SDN) subsequently developed *Plan Condor* to deploy troops permanently to the country's heaviest drug producing area. The army set up headquarters outside the town of Badiriguato, Sinaloa. The plan called for approximately 3,000 soldiers to locate and destroy marijuana and poppy plants in an area comprising the confluence of three states: Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa. The task force that served in the region drew troops from all over the Republic. The first force reported for duty on 16 January 1977. A new task force has since replaced the previous one every 6 months up to the present.<sup>23</sup>

The army hierarchy had established a *Plan Canador* in the early 1970s, which directed each military zone to conduct antidrug operations within its area of responsibility according to the extent of the threat. Drug cultivation occurred with greater frequency in the coastal states, and the military zones in those regions began to devote a substantial portion of their resources to eradication. The land-locked states tended to earmark less resources for the campaign and focused more on other civic action programs. Richard B. Craig, who did considerable research on Mexico's antidrug campaign, wrote about several problems the army had encountered. He described an unfavorable ratio of soldiers to land surface. He also noted that the army lacked sufficient resources and equipment (especially helicopters) to do a thorough job. Craig acknowledged the presence of corruption among some of the zone commanders as well as some interagency friction. It seemed that most military commanders resented being ordered about by what they perceived to be incompetent federal agents, and as the army became more involved with the antidrug campaign, this duty grew more unpopular. Officers viewed this mission as a no-win situation, which carried the potential of seriously disparaging the

military's reputation because of corruption charges. Despite these impediments, the army has posted considerable success in the campaign. Its destruction statistics have been especially impressive and far outdistance the contributions of any other federal agency.<sup>24</sup> The antidrug campaign continued to command increasing army resources throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The Salinas de Gortari administration has added significantly to the military's role in the antidrug campaign. The administration has defined narcotics trafficking as a threat to national security.<sup>25</sup> Although certain "experts" envision the drug scourge as a problem of public order rather than national security, Salinas has given this issue the highest priority.<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after taking office in December 1988, President Salinas directed the army to move against Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, a major drug trafficker. Gallardo and his organization have operated extensively in the West Coast state of Sinaloa. The army subsequently captured him and one of his top lieutenants. In October 1989, President Salinas told a joint session of the U.S. Congress that Mexico intended "to eradicate drug trafficking at its very roots."<sup>27</sup> Even the army, previously considered by many to be a "sacred cow," has not escaped close scrutiny. Incidents implicating top-level officers in protecting suspected drug trafficking have received widespread attention in both Mexico and the United States. In one case, an army general, alleged to have offered protection to drug flights landing in Mexico from South America in route to the United States, was relieved of command and reassigned to Defense Headquarters, ostensibly to place him under close supervision by senior officers.<sup>28</sup> In another case, Salinas ordered the National Commission on Human Rights to investigate the killing of seven Mexican narcotics agents by army soldiers at a remote landing strip in the southern state of Veracruz. The incident occurred in November 1991, and two army generals and three other officers were detained and subsequently imprisoned.<sup>29</sup> These responses suggest that the Mexican government takes narcotics trafficking seriously. Even though the army devotes considerable resources to the antidrug campaign, it will be expected to do even more until such time as more of these responsibilities can be transferred to civilian law enforcement agencies.

There is also another critical consideration with regard to the army's role in the antidrug campaign. Placed within the context of current U.S.-Mexican relations, this troublesome issue could become a major impediment to economic integration. The drug issue assumes an added dimension when discussed in connection with the recently-signed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Signs or perceptions of a soft counterdrug policy in Mexico could jeopardize future development of trade. A few years ago, then-California Senator Pete Wilson wrote that an inadequate response to international drug trafficking could pose the greatest threat to improved U.S.-Mexican relations. The underlying implication was that Mexico's policies might have a

major impact on the country's economic prosperity.<sup>30</sup> All this points toward the Mexican army continuing its role in the antidrug campaign.

The military's civic action programs have not only highlighted the social consciousness of the Mexican government, but they have also eased socioeconomic tensions. Thus it seems logical that civic action will remain the predominant mission of the Mexican army. The rationale is simple: The government has correlated national security with internal security. Civic action contributes directly to maintaining internal order. Moreover, the responsibilities that the military has assumed in this role leave little time for political adventurism, a benefit political leaders find especially valuable.

### **The Structure of the Mexican Army in the 21st Century.**

The army's mission will be the principal factor in determining its structure into the next century. Other elements that will bear on its structure include available funding, U.S. and regional defense policies, and the general political climate in Mexico. The present uncertainty with regard to the army's structure and organization centers on the still unmeasured influence that each factor will have.

After the student demonstrations and public unrest in 1968, the army experienced its first significant increase since World War II.<sup>31</sup> For the most part, political desires to preclude a recurrence of civil strife mandated this growth. The oil boom in the late 1970s proved instrumental in planning a large-scale modernization program. The economic crash which followed closely on the heels of that short-lived resurgence disrupted that grandiose scheme. As a result, since the early 1980s, the army's modernization has proceeded fitfully, the result of a shortage in funds rather than a lack of desire on the part of military leaders.

Midway into the Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado administration (1982-88), the National Defense Secretariat (S.D.N.) proposed a major reorganization of the army that shifted the focus on structure away from political considerations and more towards operational features. This new structural plan proposed reorganizing the long-standing military zone system into a more tactically-suited corps organization. Although this reorganization sought to reshuffle the 36 military zones into seven corps, by the time de la Madrid left office in 1988 only one corps could be considered fully functional, while another two had only a skeleton headquarters. The new S.D.N. administration (1988-94) remained committed to the reorganization, but it has made minimal progress in implementing the planned changes.<sup>32</sup> It seems likely that the restructuring process will continue into the subsequent administration (1994-2000). On the positive side, this reorganization points toward a more operationally functional

army by the year 2000. It appears doubtful that the military hierarchy--or political leaders for that matter--would sanction any new structural changes while the institution finds itself enmeshed in a partially completed reorganization. Nor is it feasible to expect that vast amounts of funds would be available to support a structure different from the corps system.

The emphasis on mobility is another trend that will continue to receive attention. One of the first stages in the modernization program started in the early 1980s with motorizing cavalry units that previously had relied on horses. The S.D.N. followed that reform in the late 1980s by purchasing six C-130 troop transport planes from the United States. The Mexican airborne brigade added them to its inventory to provide rapid response for emergency situations.<sup>33</sup> The army's internal security mission often dictates a quick reaction.

President Salinas responded to a less than successful presidential campaign and a questionable popular mandate by projecting an image of a "no-nonsense" president. Almost immediately after assuming office, he ordered a military strike force to apprehend the corrupt leader of the national petroleum workers' union, Joaquin Hernandez Galicia, nicknamed "La Quina." The force launched a surprise attack in January 1989 against the union leader's well-fortified compound in the northern state of Tamaulipas, easily capturing La Quina and confiscating a large cache of illegal weapons in the process.<sup>34</sup> Shortly thereafter, the president employed army forces in a country-wide dragnet to capture the nation's leading drug trafficker, Felix Gallardo, which they eventually did. A few months later, Salinas ordered a few thousand troops to take control of the historically renowned Cananea copper mine in northern Mexico. This was done as a preemptive measure against striking mine workers who might have used violence to gain their demands.<sup>35</sup> The increased "political visibility" of the military at the outset of Salinas' term sent a strong message to the administration's opponents and helped the new president gain the solid political footing that has set the upbeat tone of his presidency.

These successful operations would not have been possible without the recently added mobility of the army. Since the Salinas inauguration, the military has continued to focus on enhancing that mobility. In the early 1990s, the army began purchasing a fairly large number of U.S. surplus jeeps and small cargo vehicles, which had been recalled from Europe, to replace and upgrade its increasingly outmoded inventory. One Mexican analyst related that high-ranking Mexican officers had been extremely impressed with the effectiveness of U.S. forces during Operation *Desert Storm*. The U.S. success reinforced the perception in the upper echelons of the Mexican military command that self-contained, highly mobile, rapid-response forces were the future of the Mexican armed forces.<sup>36</sup> In light of the general demilitarization that has been occurring across the globe, a growth in the size of the armed forces seems to be an impractical

approach, especially for a traditionally pacifist country like Mexico. However, added mobility can act as a force multiplier if employed effectively.

The changing situation in the Mexican countryside also calls for greater mobility. The gradual abolition of the *ejidos* (state-leased farms) probably signals the end of the *guardias rurales* (rural guards). This paramilitary force has served traditionally as the "eyes and ears of the army" in some of the more isolated areas. The military provided many *ejido* members with a rifle and a modest work uniform, and they in turn helped maintain order in the countryside. Commanded by a small cadre of active officers, the *rurales* have not only served as an important source of intelligence, but also as a key link between the army and the peasants.<sup>37</sup> As privatization takes root in the agricultural sector, the *rurales* will most likely disband, leaving the military with less advanced warning of potentially volatile situations. Consequently, the ability to respond rapidly to a developing crisis should become even more critical.

The future structure of the Mexican armed forces will also be influenced in part by U.S. military policy. Although the United States will almost certainly remain a regional power, the reduction in U.S. forces will be felt throughout Latin America. The end of the cold war has made demilitarization the preferred policy. In the past, Mexican political leaders have not reacted to the asymmetry that existed between the two countries' armed forces. The prevailing climate both regionally and worldwide is not likely fundamentally to alter that asymmetry, although the latter will probably be reduced somewhat over the next few years in Mexico's favor, given the large cuts in U.S. forces. The military budget as a percentage of Mexico's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has experienced very minor fluctuations over the past 15 years.<sup>38</sup> This trend most likely will continue, and the funds allocated to the army should allow it to complete its reorganization under the corps system by the beginning of the next century.

### **The Future Influence of the Mexican Military.**

Given the backdrop of the military's influence in Latin America during the 20th century, many outsiders have assumed that the Mexican military has played a more significant political role than has actually been the case. Most of the political influence the military has attained since World War II has derived from its crisis management role, which has been fairly limited. However, that role has more often served as a double-edged sword for the army, rather than the distinct advantage some experts have perceived. Since the unfortunate incidents during the student uprisings in 1968, military leaders have been reluctant to participate in crisis situations, preferring to leave police actions to local and state authorities. The irony is that only by defending the state in a major crisis can the army substantially



augment its power and prestige within the Mexican system.

The army has only infrequently manifested its physical presence in a major way since World War II. Over the past 30 years, the military has responded to only three critical challenges to internal security. Those responses included the student movement in 1968, the rural insurgency in the early 1970s, and, more recently, the continuing struggle against the narcotics growers and traffickers. The first episode seriously tarnished the army's paternalistic and patriotic image. The "Tlatelolco Massacre" of October 1968 discouraged the army's involvement in large-scale social demonstrations where soldiers might be forced to repress the populace.<sup>39</sup> Otherwise, the military has maintained a relatively low physical profile. Even though its visibility has increased at times when Salinas has engaged in what one historian has called "Mexican Thatcherism," those surges in influence have been fleeting, given the limited duration of the military's actions.<sup>40</sup>

This strategy of "Thatcherism," named after the former British Prime Minister, refers to the state's use of excessive resources or force to control certain social groups or sectors. The government action at the Cananea mine, noted earlier, provides a good example. In that instance, the army played a prominent role, and it yielded favorable results by subduing a potentially volatile conflict.<sup>41</sup> But because its role in these episodes has tended to be short-lived, its leaders have not been able to convert their contributions into long-term gains for the institution. Instead, the hierarchy seems content to continue with its traditionally cautious approach, since the army's growing presence in the antidrug campaign places it in a more precarious position with regard to image, given the propensity for increased allegations and rumors of military corruption. As with the Cananea incident, the flare-ups in the war on drugs also tend to be transitory and not conducive to augmenting the army's influence.

In short, "Thatcherism" is more of a political phenomenon aimed at increasing the influence of the ruling party. Although political leaders seem willing to call on the military to support the status quo, they do not necessarily want it to gain added stature. As they guide the country into the next century, they will most likely try to ensure a continuing low public profile for the armed forces. The opposite would not reflect favorably upon the system that has evolved from the Mexican Revolution, since it might suggest an inability to maintain control.

Other factors also inhibit a substantial growth in military power. One has to do with the public perception of the army. Since the massive bloodletting of the revolution, an undercurrent of antimilitary sentiment in Mexico has always existed. The public traditionally has viewed the armed forces as a necessary vice to be tolerated but little more. Through the years, this veiled discontent has remained a psychological impediment to the

military's accretion of power. A recent example of this resentment has emerged in the unlikely form of new history textbooks. In September 1992, the Education Ministry announced the publication of the books for use in Mexico's public school system. A mild furor arose over the texts' treatment of the 1968 student movement. More specifically, the official history now described the military as having repressed the students. Military leaders took exception, and the President moved quickly to assuage them.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the text remains in circulation and should contribute to inculcating Mexican youth with a less than admirable opinion of the armed forces.

The economic integration that NAFTA promises for Mexico and the United States might suggest a closer military-to-military relationship as well which would seem to offer opportunities for Mexico to develop a more professional institution, thereby enhancing the stature of the armed forces at the national level. However, a strong argument against the desirability of such relations can also be presented.

One analyst, who has maintained close ties with the army, has related that high-ranking military leaders are not entirely in favor of NAFTA. Within the institution, the trade agreement has aroused suspicion about U.S. motives. Historical fears with regard to U.S. infringement on Mexican sovereignty have been resurrected, though this time such violations would occur through economic duplicity rather than traditional political or military means.<sup>43</sup>

Many U.S. citizens are reluctant to admit that most Mexicans have viewed the United States as a potential enemy. The mission of the Mexican armed forces has never been de facto to defend against foreign incursions. Realistically, if the United States ever decided to invade, the Mexicans could only hope to impede it for a very limited amount of time. The army has always focused on preserving internal security, a mission that has never required extensive military equipment purchases from the United States. The end of the cold war further obviates the need for sophisticated hardware and thus removes one reason for developing closer military ties.

Since 1990, there has been little appreciable improvement in military-to-military relations. One U.S. official close to the situation grudgingly concurred with this assessment. He added that while cordiality has increased, the status of major issues such as joint training exercises and joint defense plans has witnessed virtually no change.<sup>44</sup> Military leaders from both countries formed the Joint U.S.-Mexican Defense Commission (JUSMDC) during World War II as a forum for discussing vital defense issues. Although this body worked effectively during the conflict and in the immediate post-war period, Mexican leaders have neglected the organization since the 1960s. While the United States has attempted to reinvigorate the JMUSDC on various occasions, Mexico has opted to use it almost exclusively for

organizing symbolic ceremonies and social activities. At present, nothing indicates that the JMUSDC will reassume its original charter soon.

Since the 1930s, presidents have played the predominant role in Mexican politics. Nevertheless, while presidents and their policies and programs change every 6 years, the military as an institution has retained a great deal of continuity. The army does not place a high value on change. Military leaders have relied heavily on traditional values and principles, rather than on innovative approaches to old problems. The Constitution of 1917 designated the armed forces as the protector of national sovereignty. The military will continue to perform that mission. In so doing, it will try to assure that there will always be a "safe distance" from the powerful neighbor to the North.

As for generating increased influence from within the military itself, the prospects seem slim. Here again, the issue of traditional values plays a critical role. Unwavering loyalty to the revolution and the system begotten by it have been cardinal features of the Mexican armed forces. One insider places a different twist on this by suggesting that, in a sense, the system has bought the military's loyalty. He notes that certain benefits accrue to army officers, especially as they advance in rank. They have access to low interest loans for homes and cars. Home loans are most often used to purchase housing built for active duty officers under the auspices of the Defense Secretariat. Benefits such as these, which can also include scholarships to private universities for offspring, can increase an officer's salary by more than 30 percent. More significantly, these perquisites further commit officers to the army and make them more dependent on the institution as the primary means of fulfilling their financial responsibilities.<sup>45</sup> Indirectly, these benefits make them staunch supporters of the system and much less willing to buck it or risk expulsion by deviating from the highly centralized decision-making process. Strict compliance with the commander's directives ensures continued access to benefits. Because most officers believe that civilian government has shown concern for their needs, there will be no sudden groundswell to drastically alter the system.

The issue that always generates a lively debate is the likelihood of a military coup. After the unexpected 1973 coup in Chile, there has been a general reluctance to use the word "never" when discussing the Latin American armed forces. Nevertheless, the probability of a coup in Mexico soon is virtually nil. Aside from the loyalty that the military traditionally has displayed, officers collectively lack the requisite political skills needed for efficacious government management. More importantly, the army has direct ties only with the state. It lacks strong links to any major interest group that could fortify a military move to take political power.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, the military has no forum within which it could

exert its influence and perhaps energize key groups to support an attempt to take power from civilian leaders. The one area where the military might have the ability to project its influence is national security. However, at the outset of the Salinas administration a national security cabinet was formed to manage these issues. Although the SECDEF is a member, the president exerts tight control over this cabinet and determines what constitutes a security issue. Thus, while the military may contribute input on vital national security matters, its principal role has been to carry out presidential directives in lieu of making policy.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, tradition will continue to play a major role in the military's behavior. Army leaders have long considered their institution to be a pillar of the system that emerged from the revolution. In fact, military officers nurtured the system in its formative years. A military president founded the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, which to this day has been the country's sole ruling party. These precedents have solidified the army's position as an integral part of the "revolutionary" system. Since the 1950s, it has worked hard to cultivate the image of a paternalistic and responsible institution dedicated to improving the welfare of the people. Notwithstanding a few untoward incidents, in the more than 60 years following the revolution the army has been able to create an image that has set it apart, in a favorable way, from the vast majority of its Latin American counterparts. Military leaders have been intent on maintaining that generally benign posture, perhaps influenced in part by the widespread political failures of their regional counterparts.

### **Some Final Thoughts.**

The general deemphasis on the military that has taken place worldwide over the last few years has also had a direct effect on the Mexican armed forces. While post-1950 Mexico has shown little tolerance for fat military budgets, the lack of even a remote external threat to national security in the post-cold war era offers even less reason to enlarge the already "meager" budget. Since the mid-1980s, military leaders have talked about an ongoing modernization process, but they have also emphasized that this program will give priority to quality over quantity. In other words, bigger does not necessarily equate to better, and that reinforces the speculation about continued modest military budgets.

While analysts search for reasons that might indicate changes within the military, there presently is little to satisfy their desires. Traditionally, the Mexican armed forces have been adverse to change. Since the 1950s, the armed forces have relied heavily on political leaders for guidance in such matters. A strong partnership has been established between the government and the military, and the former will continue to pay attention

to the army's interests and needs because it wants to keep the military in its corner. If the government, dominated by the PRI, continues to retain a healthy consensus, it should have no problems maintaining the army's support. One long time expert on Mexican politics, George Grayson, writes that the centralized authority employed by the government nurtures stability.<sup>48</sup> Military leaders have long been cognizant of that reality and historically have felt comfortable with the political system. That should not come as too much of a surprise since their predecessors founded it.

Structurally, the Mexican army of the 21st century will stress greater mobility and quicker reaction. Given the further reduced threat of foreign interference in the country's internal affairs, streamlined, mobile, quick-reaction forces will be best suited for confronting the government's most pressing challenges, which most likely will come from social disturbances emanating from economic problems and from increasingly brash drug lords. The current structural transformation to the "corps system" will probably be accomplished by the turn of the century. At some point over the next decade, this new system will supersede the traditional military zone structure, making the army less politically sensitive to disruptions within individual states. It is still too early to predict the long-range political ramifications of this new structural remodeling. On the surface, the corps organization would seem to reduce the political influence of the military zone commanders. However, it might also convert seven or eight corps commanders into major power-brokers within the regions under their purview.

As for the future of U.S.-Mexican military relations, they are most likely to remain cordial but distant. As guardians of the nation's sovereignty, the Mexican army works to preserve its independent and self-reliant image. Most armed forces adhere fervently to tradition, and the Mexican military is no exception. It has found no justification for significantly altering its traditional policy of maintaining a safe distance from the United States. The latter was unsuccessful in establishing a military base or conducting joint exercises during World War II and the cold war, and security interests in the United States no longer justify the need for such policies.

Civic action or *labor social* has been the constant mission of the Mexican military in the post-revolutionary period. This mission has always been the underpinning of the army's role in society. Through civic action, the military, as a national institution, has reaped its greatest rewards. Nothing suggests that it will reduce or abandon this responsibility. On the contrary, most of its leaders would like to devote greater effort to that mission, believing that they can best enhance the army's prestige by performing those assorted tasks.

Finally, counternarcotics operations will remain a key mission. In this case, however, many commanders cringe at the

thought. In recent years, allegations of military corruption in the drug wars have impugned the army's paternalistic reputation.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, the government has bolstered civilian security services to allow law enforcement agencies to play a larger role in the war on drugs. The military will become less influential in this area as the Attorney General's Office and federal and state police forces augment their assets. This partial shifting of responsibility for the antidrug campaign may relieve the military of some of the allegations of wrongdoing that it has been subjected to. But although this policy change may take away some of the army's influence in the political arena, it will not affect its role as a loyal servant of the Mexican people and an ardent supporter of the legitimate government.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Dr. Donald E. Schulz

On January 1, 1994, a guerrilla group calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army seized four large towns and a number of smaller villages in the impoverished southern state of Chiapas. The assault took the Mexican government and military completely by surprise. At the time, the army had less than 4,000 troops in Chiapas, and many of them were on leave for the holidays. For 24 hours, the rebels held San Cristobal de las Casas--a city of 90,000 inhabitants--before retreating into the mountains. At a nearby military battalion headquarters, troops came under steady attack for 8 straight days. As the army assumed the offensive, casualties mounted. In the days that followed, well over 100 people, many of them noncombatants, were killed. Some villages were bombed, some captured guerrillas summarily executed.

The rebellion raised many questions about Mexico's future, and not the least of these had to do with the future of the military. The army had little experience with this kind of an operation; its only previous counterinsurgency experience had been during a small-scale peasant uprising in Guerrero in the 1970s. The sudden appearance of a serious domestic security threat--estimates of guerrilla strength were generally between one and two thousand armed fighters--suggested the need for changes in the military's command and intelligence structures and mission. The new reality seemed likely to lead to at least a partial shift away from the traditional roles of civic action and counternarcotics toward a greater focus on counterinsurgency. But how far that pendulum would swing no one could say.

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