

OUTSOURCING DRUG WAR DISAPPEARANCES TO MEXICO

The other day I asked whether the US was complicit in any of the hundreds of official disappearances and tens of thousands of other disappearances propagated in Mexico's drug war.

Friday, Spiegel published an interesting profile of a former DEA officer, Salvador Martinez, who ended up going to prison for trying to have his cousin's killer murdered.

And sure enough, he describes allowing this kind of violence – even encouraging it – to happen. He describes leaving his counterparts in Ciudad Juárez to conduct torture.

In one of his first assignments, which he carried out together with the Mexican police, he was there when a commandant arrested a dealer. The police led the prisoner to a house on the edge of town. The officer hauled the prisoner to the bathroom, put his head in the toilet and flushed three times, says Martinez. The prisoner remained silent. The officer put a plastic bag over the prisoner's head. "Who paid you? Who paid you, cabrón?" he demanded. Then, to Martinez, he said: "Have you seen enough?"

When he got into his car to leave, Martinez watched in the rearview mirror as a Mexican police officer took a small rod out of his car trunk. Martinez had seen a rod like that before; it was an electric cattle prod.

And he describes identifying suspects for Mexican cops to disappear.

He arrested a Mexican that he knew was working in the middle management of a cartel. He had no proof; he just knew

it. After three weeks on trial, the court had to let the manager go free. So Martinez told the Mexican commandant what that man looked like and when he would be freed. After he crossed the border, a black minibus on the Mexican side stopped beside him and took him away.

“Alright,” says Martinez, taking a deep breath. So far he has laughed a lot on his journey through the memories. But he tells the next chapter without looking up, describing operations that weren’t recorded in any files.

“A lot of people disappear in Mexico,” he says. “They are buried where no one will find them. Some are eaten by tigers and some by sharks. There are also big tanks with acid in them.” He pauses for a long time between the sentences.

“We didn’t manage to catch all the bad guys. In those cases, we gave the Mexicans their names and said, ‘Do what you need to do.’ The Mexicans made those people disappear.”

Now, this guy appears to have been arrested in 1999. That is, this violence precedes the more recent disappearances Human Rights Watch and others have been documenting (and Juárez, at least, seems to be turning around finally).

But none of this is surprising.

As more and more people talk about the disappearances happening in Mexico, in a war that exists largely because American consumers create the demand that drives the violence, we should be careful not to blame it all on the Mexicans. Because we’re not just letting it happen, we’re asking for it to happen in some cases.

DISAPPEARANCES ARE BACK. IS THE US INVOLVED (AGAIN)?

Back in the 1970s, when various Latin American countries were disappearing their citizens, the US was closely tied to those efforts via Operation Condor.

According to Human Rights Watch, Mexico is now in the Disappearance business as part of its drug war. In a report released this week, it documents almost 140 cases where some official disappeared Mexicans. And while most of the cases appear to be corrupt local or Federal police partnering with drug cartels (that is, the problem seems to be about corruption as much as it is the state disappearing people), it also describes the Navy kidnapping groups of men, perhaps as an effort to force people to infiltrate the cartels.

Human Rights Watch documented more than 20 cases of enforced disappearances perpetrated by members of the Navy in June and July 2011. The concentration of the cases within a short time period, the similar tactics described by victims' families and other witnesses, corroborated by photographic and video evidence, and the fact that the abductions were spread across three northern states strongly suggests that these were not isolated cases, but rather points to a clear modus operandi by the Navy. Given the number of members of the Navy that allegedly participated in these operations—at least a dozen official vehicles, according to witness accounts—and the fact that the Navy acknowledged that it detained several of the victims, it is unlikely that such

operations took place without the knowledge of ranking officers.

Victims' families and witnesses described near identical tactics in the raids. In each case, the Navy arrived in a large convoy of more than a dozen vehicles, the majority of which were marked with official insignia, along with two to four unmarked vehicles. They closed off entire streets, using vehicles as barricades. Heavily armed members of the Navy wearing masks then entered homes, often forcibly, without any search or arrest warrants. According to families, the people in Navy uniforms were not looking for individuals by name. Instead, they indiscriminately took young men, telling their families they were being brought in for questioning and would be released if they proved to be innocent.

That's the Navy we partner with closely, the one our two CIA "trainers" were partnering with when they almost got killed last year. And remember: the Federales with ties to the Beltrán Leyva Cartel said they were investigating a kidnapping, the polite legal term for a disappearance. Remember, too, that one of the the CIA guys got exposed, in part, because he had his post office box in the same place as an earlier CIA guy managing renditions.

Meanwhile, Borderland Beat describes a strategy Mexico's Military Intelligence proposed to President Calderon last summer: to go after the smaller, weaker cartels, because they were causing the most violence.

In the offensive it proposes against what it calls "weak criminal organizations" or "'satellite' criminal organizations" (who orbit around strong cartels), SEDENA proposes the following actions:

1. Reclassify as cartels criminal cells that gain strength in several regions of the country as a result of their criminal activity.
2. Include their leaders, their lieutenants and their families in the reports about businesses, financial transactions and other properties linked with drug trafficking.
3. Infiltrate them to gain an accurate map of their criminal logistics.
4. Organize the deployment of troops to strike blows to the nerve centers of small criminal organizations.
5. Involve federal and state police bodies in operations against the groups that generate the most violence.
6. Block all kinds of collaboration that they may receive from authorities, police and citizens.
7. Establish a bi-national Mexico-U.S. system of rewards offered to cooperate in the location and detention of the heads of "secondary drug trafficking cells."
8. Request collaboration of international tracking systems so as to locate their operational margins.

The approach is actually consistent with a legal approach the US has been using for a longer period, in which it long partnered with top Sinaloa members as informants who would take out their rivals (though the US may have finally started going after Sinaloa last spring, when it indicted Chapo Guzmán).

One of the smaller cartels targeted last year is the Beltrán Leyva Cartel.

These are just dots – certainly not proof that the US is back in the business of helping Latin

American neighbors disappear their citizens (and the HRW report covers a period prior to this new strategy and the attempted killing of our CIA guys).

But as HRW continues to document the abuses committed as part of Mexico's war on drugs (that will serve American customers), it's worth recalling that we have a history of collaborating in such nasty business (not to mention a fondness for disappearances ourselves).

THE WAR ON DRUGS OTHER COUNTRIES' RUTHLESS VICIOUS CAPITALISTS

This long Benjamin Wallace-Wells piece on the lost war on drugs is worth reading in any case. But I'd like to pose his description of the fizzling war between drug gangs against the US response to such fizzling violence.

First, Wallace-Wells offers a description of the truce between two Salvadoran gangs earlier this year.

Early this year, a former Salvadorean guerrilla fighter named Raul Mijango began meeting secretly with the leaders of the nation's two largest gangs, Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18, in prison, in an effort to negotiate a form of truce. The Salvadorean street gangs (each of which was founded in Los Angeles) are not major international movers of drugs, but they are known for an almost tribal violence, and in recent years, the conflicts between the two groups has threatened to overrun the

state.

Mijango would not say who authorized his mission, though it was widely assumed that the government had sent him. The gang leaders in prison did not consult their allies in Los Angeles. But Mijango, a former guerrilla fighter, knew what exhaustion looked like. "I sensed from the beginning that they felt that maybe this was the opportunity they were looking for," he says. In February, he asked the leaders to meet in the same room in a prison that had been set aside for that purpose, and though "the idea did not please them," Mijango says, he felt some trust had been brokered when they saw one another face-to-face. Soon he had the framework of an agreement—in which the gangs would call off their feud with one another, would stop recruiting children. In return, the leaders wanted to be sent to other, more congenial prisons, where they could be closer to their families. That was all right with the authorities, and so, in May, the leaders were transferred.

The truce was not formally announced. The way that it reached the outside world was that the killing simply stopped.

This truce is just one of the reasons I'm so puzzled by Treasury's decision to list MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization earlier this year is so puzzling. Just after the US has made a slew of MS-13 arrests and MS-13 in El Salvador has backed off the killing, the US has decided to wield terrorist-like legal means against it.

As if we had to invent a reason to keep them illegal.

Then there's Wallace-Wells' explanation why—in spite of US based examples where you can target

violence while leaving the drug sales intact—some top diplomats believe you can't end the war on "drugs."

Another reason legalization may not do much to diminish the violence is that some of the largest Mexican cartels, as they have moved more deeply into extortion and kidnapping, may be evolving out of the reach of drug policy. The problem is that some of the largest Mexican groups have moved deeper into extortion and kidnapping and have become less dependent on narcotics. "My fear is that if you legalize drugs tomorrow, I don't think you're going to reduce the number of cartels or the amount of homicide or the flow of illicit goods," says Adam Blackwell, a Canadian diplomat who is the secretary for multidimensional security at the Organization for American States. "Focusing too much on drugs takes us away from the real issues, which are"—he searches for the right word. "Structures. Cartel structures. Gang structures."

Blackwell's formulation almost exactly parallels what Hillary said yesterday about the drug war.

"I respect those in the region who believe strongly that [U.S. legalization] would end the problem," Clinton said Thursday at a Washington D.C. forum hosted by Foreign Policy magazine. "I am not convinced of that, speaking personally."

[snip]

"I think when you've got ruthless vicious people who have made money one way and it's somehow blocked, they'll figure out another way," she said. "They'll do kidnapping they'll do extortion."

But both Blackwell and Hillary suffer from a definitional problem. As a commenter here recently noted, drug cartels are actually not cartels; that's part of why the competition between various gangs is so violent. So it can't be the "cartel structures" that distinguishes gangs from other capitalist enterprises (many of which are much closer to cartels than drug gangs) that operate ruthlessly.

And while most purportedly legitimate businesses don't kidnap (they leave that to the US government!), they do extort, though that usually takes the form of threats to take away market access.

At some point, when you take the violence away, the drug networks look like a significant group of very respectable American capitalist enterprises that use vicious techniques—that at least should and probably are illegal—to make money. At some point in this stage of the war on drug capitalists, we're going to have to get a lot more specific about what makes these capitalists bad even though they use many of the same approaches the capitalists running our own country use.

AS OBAMA PREPARES TO NOT WITHDRAW FROM AFGHANISTAN, TREASURY DECLARES THE WAR ON DRUGS THERE

Jim had a perceptive post this morning talking about how, now that Obama has won re-election promising an Afghan withdrawal plan, his Administration has started negotiating a Status

of Forces Agreement that will allow forces to stay past 2014. There were several other hints today that we'll be in Afghanistan past that promised date, starting with General Joseph Dunford's confirmation hearing to take over the Afghan Command from General John Allen (which Jim will hit in detail tomorrow).

Then there's this. For the first time ever, Treasury has designated a key Taliban member—Mullah Naim Barich—not a terrorist, but a drug kingpin.

The Treasury Department has previously sanctioned Taliban leaders and affiliates for their support of terrorism, as well as money-exchange houses supporting the Taliban, but Thursday's designation marks the first time the department has designated a senior Taliban official for narcotics trafficking.

Treasury said Thursday that Mullah Naim Barich, the "shadow governor" of Afghanistan's largest opium-producing province, is a narcotics kingpin.

"Today's action exposes the direct involvement of senior Taliban leadership in the production, manufacturing, and trafficking of narcotics in Afghanistan and underlines the Taliban's reliance on the drug trade to finance their acts of terror and violence," David S. Cohen, under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said in a news release. "Treasury will continue exposing links between the international narcotics trade and terrorist networks, in Afghanistan, and wherever else they exist."

Now, the Taliban and other Afghans have been neck deep in the opium trade forever. Indeed, Wikileaks just released a 2007 Stratfor document claiming that DEA had been ordered to back off

Hamid Karzai's now-deceased brother Ahmed Wali Karzai's drug involvement.

Yet, as WSJ notes, Treasury has always gone after the Taliban via terrorism designations, not drug ones.

Terrorism designations will be more difficult to sustain if we "pull out" in 2014 declaring victory in Afghanistan.

Worry not! We've got the Global War on Drugs in Afghanistan now.

THE WAR ON TERROR- AND-DRUGS TURNS INWARD

The Treasury Department named the US-Central American gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) a Transnational Criminal Organization, meaning it can apply terrorist-type financial sanctions against the group and its members.

This strikes me as a worrying new precedent. Previously, Treasury had sanctioned Los Zetas, Brother's Circle, the Camorra, and two Yakuza groups. While all operated in the US—Los Zetas has significant operations—MS-13 was first formed in the US, in Los Angeles, with close ties to El Salvador. Treasury says Immigration and Customs Enforcement has arrested 4,078 MS-13 gang members, so this affects a significant number of Americans.

In other words, this will repeat and probably escalate what we saw after 9/11—asset freezes of American citizens with little due process—in such a way that disproportionately affects one ethnic or religious group.

I also wonder whether this move intends to give additional legal cover for DEA's operations in

Central America—backed by Special Forces—particularly Honduras. At a time when many of the leaders of the countries that will be targeted are increasingly opposed to the war on drug, we're ratcheting up the legal framework to make it look just like terrorism.

Maybe this is all very smart law enforcement. But it's the creeping application of intelligence-based enforcement without much debate about whether such an approach infringes on Americans' rights.

WHY WOULD THE US GOVERNMENT HAVE DECONFLICTION ISSUES WITH MANSSOR ARBABSJAR IN 2010?

Before I look at the other ways Gregory Saathoff's report opining that Manssor Arbabsjar is not manic hurts the government's case, I want to discuss a rather curious citation Saathoff includes.

Troutman, D. (2010, January 13). Email to Virginia Villareal re: Deconfliction (in reference to a national security concern regarding Manssor Arbabsjar), p. 1.

As you'll recall, the government claims that Arbabsjar first came on their radar in May 2011 when a DEA Informant claimed that Arbabsjar contacted him to arrange a kidnapping.

And yet, according to this, someone was emailing Virginia Villareal (there's a Customs and Border Patrol Officer currently in San Antonio by that

name) in January 2010 about a national security issue involving Arbabsiar?

Deconfliction is the term used for when agencies with overlapping interests sort out their turf—particularly if the agencies are using weapons or informants. The timing indicates that it came during—and probably was part of—Arbabsiar’s naturalization process in 2009-2010.

DHS: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). (2009, June 24). Memorandum subject: IBIS hit resolution for applicant: Manssor Arbabsiar, p. 1.

DHS: USCIS. (2010, April 23). N 652, naturalization interview results, pp. 1-8.

DHS: USCIS. (2010, August 6). N-400, application for naturalization, pp. 1-10.

DHS: USCIS. (2010, August 30). Form N-445, notice of naturalization oath ceremony, pp. 1-2.

And at one level, it’s not all that surprising that there would be a national security concern as Arbabsiar applied for citizenship: his cousin is a high ranking Quds Force member. Indeed that—plus Arbabsiar’s criminal background—is one of the reasons it’s hard to believe he even got citizenship, given that equivalent issues can get a Green Card holder deported. And he appears to have done that without paying for an immigration attorney (he complained to Saathoff he had to pay for an attorney for his son during this period, but not an immigration attorney, though they can be inexpensive).

So at the very least, this suggests at least one other agency was aware of Arbabsiar as he went through the immigration process.

But I do find the timing rather interesting given the way Saathoff describes Arbabsiar’s actions that year. He was taking many trips to

Iran—purportedly to bring cash back from real estate investments there and he was living in Corpus Christi, away from his wife. (Note, IBIS is the database the government uses to check people as they cross borders to make sure they're not terrorists or drug runners, which is presumably why the entry above and a 2012 one were listed as sources.)

In my interviews with Mr. Arbabsiar and in reviewing documents that were not cited by Dr. First at the time of his declaration, Mr. Arbabsiar acknowledged that this was in fact a period of significant international activity. In addition to attaining his United States citizenship, during early 2010 he spent most of his time apart from his wife living mostly in Corpus Christi or travelling overseas. In 2010, he flew to Iran on four separate occasions in order to secure and bring back rental money from his Iranian property holdings. He estimated that during these trips he brought back up to \$8,000-\$9,000 on each trip.

[snip]

In his August 4, 2012 interview, he recalled a 2009 trip to Iran where he obtained hair transplant surgery in Iran because it was less expensive than in the U.S. With decreasing revenues in the U.S., he made four separate trips to Iran in 2010 in order to bring back funds from his Iranian investment properties.

[snip]

In fact, 2010 was a year of significant international activity for Mr. Arbabsiar with more international air travel for him than was recorded for any other year in the previous decade. He took four separate flights to Iran during 2010 and also attained his U.S. citizenship and

passport. In his interviews with me, he reported that he would bring back money from Iranian investments as well as Iranian goods for his wife and son.

Then his business partner died and yet, in spite of the fact he was financially strapped, he dropped (or rather, lost) the car business.

By late 2010, following the death of his business partner in July, he had moved from Corpus Christi to Austin in order to live at home with his wife. In our September 26 interview, he recalled: "After Steve died, my life changed a lot. Up until that point I was spending some time in Austin and some time in Corpus. But after he died, I didn't want to do the car business [in Corpus Christi] any more.

[snip]

Living in both Austin and Corpus Christi during that year, it was only late in the year and following his friend's death in July that he finally moved to Austin to live with his wife where he engaged in activities including landscaping around the home and planting fruit trees.

His wife described him during as depressed, sitting at home, in this later period.

For this example, he relies on Ms. Arbabsiar's wife's report that "for roughly one year around approximately 2010, Mr. Arbabsiar was severely depressed, isolating himself in his bedroom and rarely getting out of bed except to pace around his bedroom and chain smoke."

It was after that depression and a period when he was in medical treatment in late 2010 that

Arbabsiar reached out to his cousin to build an “export business.”

My life was going bad – I had lost my friend and my dad – my cousin, he took advantage of me. I hate to say that, and I trusted him – my whole family, they should help me. I wanted to do a good business, an export business.

Remember, in addition to talking to Narc about killing the Saudi Ambassador, Arbabsiar was also talking about dealing drugs.

Again, all of this might suggest nothing more than an appropriate awareness of Arbabsiar’s cousin’s identity (but even so, that suggests the myth that Arbabsiar approached Narc out of the blue is just that—a myth).

But Arbabsiar was a very unlikely person to have gotten his citizenship when and how he did, particularly without the apparent assistance of an immigration lawyer. And between the time the government presumably identified Arbabsiar as an Iranian with ties to Quds Force and the time he ultimately got his citizenship, he made a lot of trips to Iran to get cash. Then, once he got citizenship, he lost his business and went into a funk and then—went to, or went back to, his cousin to launch “a good business, an export business,” and once again he returned to the States with thousands of dollars in cash, just like in 2010. During the entire time the FBI was purportedly watching him set up an assassination attempt, according to the Corpus Christi cops, they never once contacted those cops, not even to check the criminal record that their dead tree files showed.

It sure sounds like the government was following Arbabsiar a lot longer than the 18 months they claim.

But then the report also reveals how Arbabsiar first found Narc.

Mr. Arbabsiar stated that the Mexican

woman that he contacted to help identify someone to carry out the assassination attempt on the Saudi Ambassador had a younger sister with whom he had a sexual relationship in 1992, while he was married to his third wife.

So maybe his relationship with the DEA goes back to 1992, when he fucked his way into the family?

AP REPORTS “STRONG CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE” CARTEL INVOLVED IN TRES MARIAS HIT

The AP presents as exclusive news something that has been obvious for weeks: it appears likely a drug cartel—the Beltran Leyva Cartel—targeted two American CIA officers for assassination.

A senior U.S. official says there is strong circumstantial evidence that Mexican federal police who fired on a U.S. embassy vehicle, wounding two CIA agents, were working for organized crime on a targeted assassination attempt.

Let’s be clear what this is: it is not news that a cartel was likely behind this hit, nor that the hit was intentional. Rather, what’s new is that a single US official will admit as much in anonymous quotes, even while the AP’s Mexican sources are much less coy about this likelihood, and one second-hand source in the article says the attack was an attempt to annihilate all three passengers of the car.

Raul Benitez, a security expert at Mexico's National Autonomous University, said Mexican military sources have told him that "the attack was not an error," and "the objective was to annihilate the three passengers in the car."

"The same car with the same people had been going up and back (to the marine training camp) for a week, so perhaps some lookout who worked for drug traffickers informed the police, or the Beltrans" about the vehicle, Benitez said.

Though that story, too, is inconsistent with the bullet patterns on the car, which were clearly focused primarily on the guy in the passenger seat, avoiding almost entirely the Navy captain who was in the back seat. That is, the attackers were targeting the Americans, and probably one of them more aggressively than the other (remember that one of them was on a temporary trip to Mexico, whereas the other was stationed at the Embassy).

All sources still seem a bit credulous about what the CIA officers were doing however, repeating earlier reports they were headed to a military base (though not specifying the CIA officers-who-would-sound-more-like-JSOC-guys were training Mexicans in sharp-shooting).

The CIA agents were heading down a dirt road to the military installation with a Mexican Navy captain in the vehicle when a carload of gunmen opened fire on them and chased them.

I've laid out here why it would be well to at least question that story: the description of where they were headed doesn't make sense, the local press seemed to hint at other activities, and so on.

In any case, Mexicans appear much readier to admit that Mexico's cartels are both

knowledgeable of and responding to Americans fighting the drug war in Mexico than Americans are. That's the news in this story.

DID THE CIA AGENTS IN MEXICO SHOOT AT THEIR PURSUERS?

The NYT's story on the CIA office rs shot at in Mexico—and possibly the



WaPo one as well—appear to be partly a response to the publication of the CIA connection in Mexico's lefty La Jornada, which published a series of stories on the event yesterday. But there are details in those stories not treated in the US stories I've seen—details that increase my questions about whether the CIA guys shot at their pursuers.

The NYT, for example, repeats the Mexico Navy's clarification of its original release that their captain wasn't actually driving the car, but was sitting in the back seat.

The Mexican Navy said Tuesday in a statement that an American was driving the vehicle and that during the attack the captain, who was handling logistics and translating for the men, remained in the back seat calling for help on his

cellphone.

The men were wounded, the Navy said, when the rain of bullets managed to tear through the car's protective armor.

This appears to be an attempt to answer how the Americans got hurt inside a bullet proof car. But it actually presents more problems than it answers. The pictures of the Land Cruiser show three main kinds of bullet damage to the car: the tires appear to have been shot out (and something may have happened to the back right wheel), at least four bullets hit—and may have pierced—the rear window of the vehicle, and a ton of shots hit—but don't appear to have pierced—the passenger window. But there appears to be less damage to the driver side, mostly bullets in the steel. Did the bullets enter the rear window and go past the Mexican captain to injure Americans in the front seat? And how do such shots injure people in the leg and stomach—through the steel doors? Remember, too, that some reports say 30 bullets hit the car, but 60 shell casings were found at the scene.

Which is why I find it interesting that Mexico's Attorney General is asking the Federales for the guns used in the attack.

Oh, and by the way, according to this article, the CIA officers were shooting instructors who were training the Mexican Navy's special forces on, among other things, sharpshooting. Are you telling me shooting instructors had no guns in the car—not even the Mexican Navy captain—as reports say over and over?

Though of course if they were really training the Navy on shooting, it'd be more likely that they were JSOC or retired JSOC, which might explain why all these stories came out saying they're CIA, which is bad, but still not as bad as active duty military would be.

Incidentally, in one of La Jornada's stories, a Labor Party Senator, Ricardo Monreal bitches not only that Felipe Calderón lets the Americans fly

drones in Mexico, but also that he allows US agents to be armed in the country.

And if the Americans—or the Mexican captain, now sitting in the backseat—did return fire, then it might explain another detail reported by La Jornada.

The paper reports that there were actually 18 police involved in the attack, not just the 12 in custody; there was an initial group of police in civilian clothes, and then a later group in uniform, who ultimately stopped the attack (family members of some of the men in custody say they were among the later, uniformed group). More interesting, three of the five (civilian) cars used in the attack are reportedly not in the custody of the Attorney General conducting the investigation. Is there evidence on those cars—such as bullet marks of their own—that somebody in Mexico or the US would like to bury?

Also note, the same article says that when the uniformed police showed up one of the agents yelled out that they were diplomats traveling with a Navy guy, which is what stopped the shooting. Uh, during a gun battle? Yelled? And in what language, given that the Navy captain was purportedly their translator (even the one attached to the US embassy in Mexico)? Did he open the door to yell?

All that's assuming these guys are really fancy shooting instructors, though. One of La Jornada's stories reports both that the kind of training these men were doing has been going on since the last Administration (presumably meaning the Fox Administration, which ended in 2006), but also that they've been engaged in it just since last Tuesday (remember, one of the two agents is not based in Mexico and was just here on a special assignment, so that's possible).

Then there's the question of where the Americans were headed. La Jornada—and the original Navy release—say they were headed to a training camp in Xalatlaco, which is marked on the map above.

The fight took place close to the town of Huitzilac, as the Americans were pulling into a dirt road, where the police said they were hunting kidnappers. Except reports say the Americans were coming from Mexico City. It seems like it would only make sense to go through Huitzilac and Tres Mariás to get to Xalatlaco if you were coming from Cuernavaca—there are more direct routes from Mexico City. As I noted, there was a shoot out in Cuernavaca the night before this attack, and the CIA agents were originally taken there, only later to be taken to a Navy hospital in Mexico City and then brought back to the States, so it would be interesting if they were coming from Cuernavaca.

Finally, there's this. La Jornada includes this story in their package on the shooting, without an explanation of what it has to do with the shooting. It talks about the cooperation and intelligence sharing between the US and Mexico on law enforcement—including drugs and money laundering. But it also focuses on US participation in interrogations. And it notes that both the Mexican Navy (in whose company the CIA agents were traveling) and the Attorney General (who is investigating the shooting) conduct such information sharing. Among the two notable cases of cooperation the article discusses is this one, in which the Navy captured a guy they believed to be El Chapo Guzman's son, but who turned out to be a used car dealer.

After working months with U.S. intelligence, the Mexican navy said it believed it had nabbed a big prize in a known Guadalajara narco-haven: the son of Mexico's top fugitive drug lord.

But it turned out they got the wrong man.

The man arrested Thursday as the presumed son of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman is really Felix Beltran Leon, 23,

and not Alfredo Guzman Salazar, as the Mexican Navy had presented him, the Attorney General's Office said Friday.

Mexico and the US blamed each other for the faulty intelligence.

The Attorney General's Office issued a statement earlier Friday saying the original information on his identity came from the United States.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said the information came from Mexico.

"The Mexican Navy and Mexican law enforcement have said this is El Chapo's son and that's what we took," said DEA spokesman Rusty Payne, noting that the DEA is working separately to confirm the man's identity.

Now, the article may be entirely unrelated, or it may imply there's a tie they can't confirm between this earlier botched operation and the shooting last week.

As the WaPo reported yesterday, one of the guys in the incident, Stan Dove Boss had a post office box in the same facility as a guy involved in renditions. And the Federales claimed they were investigating a kidnapping, which is another name for capture and interrogation, particularly of the kind we've been doing in the last decade.

Were these guys in Mexico for shooting lessons, or interrogations?

Update: In addition to all the reasons why the Mexicans and Americans would have for hiding whatever these spooks were doing in Mexico, there's also the recent example of the DEA-related shooting in Honduras. A report released earlier this month makes it clear our government has been lying its ass off about what went on in the May 11 shooting.

DEAR CIA: MAYBE IT'S TIME TO SPRING FOR NEW PO BOXES?

I've suggested since the "names" of the two "trainers" ambushed in Mexico last Friday were released they were likely covers.

Not only are they apparently covers, but one of them was tied to a PO Box whose prior user had already been publicly tied to the CIA's rendition program.

But an examination of public records suggests that the name used by one of the men may be fictitious, with similarities to others created by the CIA to provide cover for its officers overseas.

Shortly after the shooting, major Mexican news organizations identified one of the U.S. officials as Stan D. Boss, a name associated with a post office box at a Dunn Loring mail facility tied to at least one previous CIA cover identity that was publicly exposed. Records indicate that Boss was issued a Social Security number in Texas in 2004. Beyond that, the records are largely blank, with not even a date of birth associated with the name.

That same Dunn Loring post office is linked to dozens of other names that have similarly scant records and to Social Security numbers issued around the same time. Among the previous holders of post office boxes at that location was an individual named Philip P. Quincannon, who apparently does not exist but who was listed as an officer with at least two aviation companies

suspected of involvement in CIA
rendition flights after the Sept. 11,
2001, attacks.

Call me crazy, but these narcos are pretty shrewd guys. If they discover Stan Dove Boss has been picking up noted rendition guy Philip P. Quincannon's mail, they might make certain conclusions about what line of work Stan Dove Boss is in (as if the name weren't already a dead giveaway). And they might show up with 4 cars full of Federales to try to keep Stan Dove Boss off their turf.

Jeebus. It's bad enough we're invading Mexico with our spooks. But we're sending them in with transparent covers.

THE DIPLOMACY OF AMBUSHES

The reporting on the ambush of 2 American trainers in Mexico on Friday reminds me of the reporting on Ray Davis' antics in Pakistan last year. Then, there was a squeamishness about mentioning that he was a CIA contractor, even after that had been widely reported in Pakistan, even in English. Here, too, there's a hesitation to describe what the trainers were doing in Mexico or publish the names that have been reported in Mexico (which I suspect are covers). Much of the American reporting neglects any mention of possible attempted murder charges for the attack.

More striking, too, is that only the AP has reported the US Embassy in Mexico's accusation that this was an ambush. The Embassy in Mexico started calling this an ambush at least by Saturday (according to this account, they started calling it that on Friday after hearing the story of the two trainers). Here's what the

AP says the Embassy said yesterday.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico City said Monday that two U.S. government employees and a Mexican Navy captain were heading to a training facility outside the city of Cuernavaca when they were ambushed by a group of gunmen that included federal police. The Mexican government said federal police were conducting unspecified law-enforcement activities in the rural, mountainous area known for criminal activity when they came upon the car, which attempted to flee and came under fire from gunmen in four vehicles including federal police.

(Lawyers for the 12 Federales being detained—and some of the early reporting on this—say they were investigating a kidnapping, but I guess that's not official.)

CNN appears to have asked State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland whether this was an ambush—and with her equivocation, they chose not to publish that the Embassy in Mexico said it was.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico is cooperating with the investigation into the shooting incident, Victoria Nuland, the State Department spokeswoman, said Monday.

"I'm not going to get ahead of the investigation. I think we're going to wait and see what that concludes," she said when asked whether the incident was an attack or an ambush.

The WaPo doesn't get into questions of ambushes or not—but it does give more information on the trainers (whom it does refer to as such).

Over the weekend, the two men, both in stable medical condition, were evacuated

to the United States, according to a U.S. State Department official.

One of the wounded men was attached to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, the other appeared to be in Mexico on temporary assignment, according to U.S. law enforcement officials who spoke the condition of anonymity because the case is still under investigation.

[snip]

The two U.S. employees were headed to a Mexican Navy training facility, accompanied by a Mexican Navy captain, meaning that U.S. trainers were attacked by the federal police forces they have spent the past five years helping to train.

Here's a thought.

For the moment, I suspect this is what the US Embassy in Mexico (though not what Nuland) says it is: an ambush of two "trainers" to prevent them from getting to the Naval base where they were cooperating on counter-narcotics operations.

But what if the Federales mention of a kidnapping is accurate? That is, what if they were pursuing "kidnappers" they knew to be the American trainers? Is it possible we helped the Mexican military take someone into custody—perhaps on the Navy base—they wanted to free or retaliate for? Is it possible we got ambushed for helping the military capture someone? Did the names of the Americans—Jess Hoods Garner and Stan Dove Boss—come from the Federales, in an effort to expose their covers?

The Mexicans have shut down coverage of this pretty hard, both by locking down the site for most of the day on Friday and limiting access to the 12 Federales in custody.

It clearly seems like the trainers were ambushed (and as I've said, the shots seem to have

concentrated on whoever was in the passenger seat). But it's also possible that there's a back story that is more explosive than the ambush itself.