

# Mexican Elites Control the Drug Trade

Book Review by Wayne Lutton

Last year the *New York Times* reported that undercover U.S. Customs agents were ordered by the Clinton Administration to halt an investigation into drug money laundering on the part of Gen. Enrique Cervantes, Mexico's Minister of Defense. As the *Times* revealed, "U.S. officials walked away from an extraordinary opportunity to examine allegations of the official corruption that is considered the main obstacle to anti-drug efforts in Mexico." The senior Customs Agent who led the undercover probe, William Gately, said his investigation ran a gauntlet of resistance from the start (Tim Golden, "Top Mexican Off-Limits to U.S. Drug Agents," *New York Times*, March 16, 1999).

In his book *Drug Lord*, Terrence E. Poppa, an investigative reporter of the first rank, shows how the Mexican drug trade operates. It is controlled from the top by members of the privileged elite who run the government and other key institutions of society. The drug lords, such as Pablo Acosta, whose life of crime is the subject of this book, are simply employees who front for the powerful figures who permit them to operate. When a particular drug dealer gets out of line or is no longer useful, he is removed and replaced by someone else. As the author explains:

*Mexico goes through the motions of dealing with drug trafficking as part of an elaborate deception. It will burn a field of marijuana in the presence of the media, but only after the tops [the most potent part of the plant] have been harvested. It will stage public burnings of seized cocaine, but it is more likely to be corn starch inside the packages, the cocaine having long been removed and sold to the favored groups. It*

*will allow DEA agents in the field, but block and frustrate every investigative effort. Its facilitation of drug trafficking pump-primed drug addiction throughout North America, yet it routinely blames the victims and rages and fumes whenever it is accused of involvement. It will offer up a sacrificial lamb, some trafficker whose time has come, as a way of placating the victims. It will even offer up an occasional official. But then business will continue as usual*

*The Mexico of today is an illusion, a country where tremendous time and energy is spent in deception ....*

*Americans would be surprised and perhaps deeply disturbed to learn that*

*these organized criminal assaults against the United States by a governmental system find their origins not only in the greed of a particular political class, but also in the depth of the hatred that existed within the power elite for the United States.*

The author shows how the system works in practice by tracing the career of one major drug dealer, Pablo Acosta. Until he was liquidated by the Mexican Federal Judicial Police, Acosta annually supplied around a third of the cocaine consumed in the United States, as well as tons of high-quality marijuana. From his base in the dusty town of Ojinaga, across the Rio Grande from Presidio, Texas, Acosta's organization provided drugs to traffickers throughout Texas and New Mexico to California, and as far away as Michigan and North Carolina.

Acosta was, in effect, given a license to traffic by Mexican authorities. For monthly payments, based according to volume, state and federal police, and the military, allowed Acosta to operate his drug business.

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**Drug Lord: The Life and Death of a Mexican Kingpin**

by Terrence Poppa  
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Acosta even carried military and federal police badges, allowing him to carry guns legally. The credentials apparently were a gift from the commander of the Fifth Military Zone, General Juan Arevalo Gardoqui, who was later appointed Defense Minister by President Miguel de la Madrid.

Locally, Acosta was both feared and respected. He bought goodwill by helping farmers, underwriting civic improvements, paying medical expenses for indigents, and other acts of charity. But this was good business, since the beneficiaries became extra eyes and ears for his organization.

Acosta's downfall was brought about by his own addiction to cocaine. He became a mental and physical wreck, unable to manage a complex drug trafficking organization. When Acosta was no longer useful, the chief federal prosecutor in Chihuahua issued a warrant for his arrest. He was cornered and gunned down in

Santa Elena, near Big Bend National Park, by the Mexican federal judicial police.

The Mexican government heralded Acosta's execution as proof that they were serious about dealing with drug traffickers. In truth, Acosta's "territory" was simply handed over to another dealer, Amado Carrillo Fuentes. "It was more like a corporate restructuring where some executives get the ax and new officers are brought in," the author points out.

Pappa notes that the drug trade is only one of the Mexican elite's wealth-generating enterprises. A consequence of the plundering and resulting impoverishment of their own people is the great migration of Mexicans from what could be a prosperous country, to the United States.

*Drug Lord* is not only an immensely informative book; it is also a great read. I cannot imagine that anyone buying this book will be disappointed.