



What is the moral equivalent of war?



William James thought about this question in 1906. He observed that there was no way to “sustain political unity and civic virtue” in a nation “in the absence of war or a credible threat.” Since that time, the term war and its moral equivalence have been much considered and much abused.

Some of Woodrow Wilson’s people made the argument that the Great War (WWI) was the moral equivalent of reform. The Good War (WWII) set a high standard for war, but was followed by other kinds of armed conflict, most of them not “declared” in the constitutional sense and many simply “public policy mobilizations”: dozens of efforts to achieve worthy goals in policy included the War on Poverty in the 1960s, the War for Energy Reform in the 1970s and, Mexico contributing its War on Organized Crime (touching the security interests of the US) in the current period.

In the context of the latter 20th century, the US rarely balked at using the war metaphor. E. Pendleton Herring, the architect of the National Security Act of 1947 and great political scientist of administrative history in the US, called war “the red spur of progress.” Bloody it is, but Herring saw war pushing forward technology, medicine, industrial organization, and social structures.

Going to war” is tempting for a leader who sees in James’ terms the key to political unity... because “war taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay...”

In the context of Mexico’s extended violence and rising death toll in the war on organized crime, and specifically in the moment following the killing of 3 US citizens in cold blood on the streets between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, the biggest security delegation the US has ever sent to Mexico arrived on Tuesday the 23rd of March.

It was an executive team that arrived -- from State, from Defense, from various levels of law enforcement (but, not from Congress).

It was supposed to be an ordinary event, “for the purpose of evaluating the advances in the combat against the drug cartels and organized crime under the Mérida Initiative.” It seemed on its face however, extraordinary. In time, we will probably find out that this was the case.



There were four main themes discussed, each category provoking us to suggest that more needs to be done:

What is being discussed	What needs to be done to move forward
Disruption of crime organizations	Cutting off the financial support of organized crime in banks, exchange houses and all corporate channels of money laundering and influence
Strengthening Mexican institutions	Deep reform of Mexican judicial processes and police administration, including support of implementation of the still pending judicial reforms of 2007-8
Boosting community capacities to resist power of the cartels	Actually generating the economic development and employment necessary to provide the basis to resist
Securing the border against the movement of illegal goods and workers, but keeping trade agile through "smart" high tech operations	Seeing the border as more than an international jurisdictional line on the map, and locating the borderlands of the US and Mexico as the site of shared problems and possibilities extending well beyond the border into each country

"What is being discussed" looks a good deal like a continuation of what has been periodically announced but not systematically pursued in Mexico and the US. To some this appears to be a kind of special application in Mexico of the General Stanley McChrystal reformulation of the current "winning hearts and minds" strategy in Afghanistan.

The conditions on the ground are not likely to change with this approach, even if tweaked up a bit from what is happening right now. It is just not enough.

"What is needed to be done" will take more time and more effort. It requires a commitment on the part of the Mexican government and political class to do what has not been done yet in the "transition" to modern democracy and markets that began in the 1980s.

And, it requires patience and extended non-military support on the part of the United States, not an easy matter in this period of economic difficulty, budget pressures and a tilt toward military solutions.



Nonetheless, in the short run the situation would be changed dramatically for the better by focusing on the first category, viz. cutting off the financial base of organized crime by an aggressive coordination with banks, exchange houses, and corporate covers – not the easiest procedure for any government trying to maintain a balance of regulation and respect for market procedures, though given the low esteem and poor images of financial institutions in this period not an impossible procedure at all.

This, by the way, is the top recommendation of the Mexican military whose personnel have been placed in the most difficult position of all – carrying the brunt of the current military-police strategy focus. The head of Sedena, General Guillermo Galván G. has noted that the military cannot fulfill its tasks alone, but the key assistance he argues for is the cutting off of the financial base of organized crime which provides a budget for armaments and conflict well in excess of what the military enjoys.

Our observation is that using the Mérida Initiative to somehow match the budget of the cartels would be a backward approach and have a devastating escalation and prolongation of the conflict – better to cut the cartels off (with all that may require in terms of intervention), while supporting the military and the reform of the police.

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