

**Southern Border Violence: Homeland Security Threats,
Vulnerabilities, and Responsibilities**

Chairman Joe Lieberman

March 20, 2009

Good morning and thanks to the people of Arizona and its capital city for hosting this field hearing today on the very real consequences for American communities brought on by the proliferation of the Mexican drug cartels and their nightmarish violence.

I would especially like to thank Governor Jan Brewer, Attorney General Terry Goddard and other officials from across the state who will testify before the Committee today. You have all been working tirelessly on the front lines to keep your citizens safe and your state prosperous, and I want you to know that your voices are important and are being heard.

I would also like to pay tribute to my dear friend and your Senator, John McCain, for recognizing the threat of the Mexican drug wars to U.S. homeland security and proposing this hearing.

He is a great American, a true patriot, and the nation is fortunate he has dedicated his life to public service.

As the citizens of Arizona know only too well, the violence in Mexico has claimed over 7,000 lives since the beginning of 2008 as the cartels have gone to war with each other and the Mexican government. This turmoil has been precipitated by increased enforcement efforts of the Department of Homeland Security at the border, which has made it more difficult for the cartels to smuggle drugs into the U.S., and by Mexican President Felipe Calderon's heroic decision to take on the drug cartels two years ago and root out corruption in his own government.

As can be expected, the Mexican drug cartels have reacted as the lawless thugs that they are.

Many of their killings bear the hallmarks we typically associate with terrorist organizations: grisly beheadings, gunfights on crowded city streets, the targeted intimidation and assassination of government officials, and – as Phoenix is painfully aware – kidnappings and ransom demands. These are real atrocities.

While it is true that the vast majority of victims are associated with the Mexican cartels or human traffickers, we also know that innocent civilians have been caught in the crossfire, that the intensity of the violence has created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty in border communities, and that the cartels have extended their deadly reach far past the border.

Law enforcement tells us there are no indications the cartels plan to export here the kind of gruesome violence occurring in Mexico. But they have the weapons, the networks of operatives throughout the U.S., and utter disregard for human life to do so.

According to the FBI, the Mexican drug cartels are now the top organized crime threat within the United States, displacing the Mafia. In addition to the kidnappings and home invasions they carry out in Arizona -which we will hear about today - they are increasingly responsible for other crimes. They steal cars from border cities in which to smuggle guns and cash back to Mexico. El Paso and Laredo, Texas, have experienced the most dramatic increase in car thefts in recent years, but Phoenix and Tucson are

among the top 20 most vulnerable cities. The drug cartels and smuggling organizations also attack each other to hijack loads of drugs or aliens from competing operators.

And of course, the Mexican drug cartels' primary business is smuggling narcotics across the border to distribute in 230 U.S. cities from Anchorage, Alaska, to Hartford, Connecticut, and everywhere in between.

In this regard, the U.S. bears some responsibility for the ongoing crisis. The insatiable appetite of Americans for illegal drugs and the subsequent free flow of illegal cash and guns into Mexico has helped fuel the cartels' explosive growth and provided them with the resources to wage war with each other and outgun the Mexican government.

The good news is that the Obama Administration recognizes the severity of the problem. The President was in Mexico last week demonstrating the nation's commitment to the Mexican people and their President. Three top Cabinet officials have travelled south of

the border in the last month, with Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano going twice.

DHS is redeploying resources to the border to step up the detection of firearms and cash bound for Mexico and drugs and undocumented aliens bound for the U.S. And just last week, DHS announced the appointment of Alan Bersin to be a special representative for border affairs – a border czar, if you will – whose job is to make sure the Administration’s border initiatives in response to the Mexican drug cartels is efficient and coordinated.

DHS is also finalizing a government-wide contingency plan if violence spills across the border. And the State Department is implementing the \$14 million Merida Initiative – albeit not fast enough – to screen and train Mexican law enforcement officers, purchase helicopters for the Mexican military, reform Mexico’s judicial system, and purchase and deploy scanning technology at border crossings.

These are significant actions, but we can and should do more. I am determined to expand the resources available to DHS, the

Department of Justice, and state and local law enforcement agencies in the border region to take on the cartels in the most forceful way we can.

With broad bipartisan support, the Committee's Ranking Member, Susan Collins, and I successfully passed through the Senate a \$550 million amendment to the Fiscal Year 2010 budget resolution last month. The amendment would send over two thousand more law enforcement officers and investigators to the border region and specifically sets aside \$40 million for state and local law enforcement to expand their anti cartel operations.

I also intend to push for additional money for these purposes when the Fiscal Year 2009 emergency supplemental appropriations bill moves through Congress in the coming weeks.

That a large majority of the guns confiscated in Mexico originate in the U.S. is of grave concern to the Mexican government and rightly so. We must do everything in our power to police existing laws to prevent the cartels from smuggling high caliber firearms out of the United States. The law provides for one

inspection a year for gun shops, for example, yet only about 25 percent of shops along the border are inspected each year. We need to step up these inspections.

We must also recognize that existing laws make it very difficult for law enforcement to fight back against the cartels. The ban on assault weapons should be renewed to stop the cartels from purchasing semi-automatic weapons legally and converting them into cop-killing machine guns. And at the very least, we should close the gun show loophole, which allows individuals to purchase high-caliber weapons without even having to give their names or addresses, much less undergo background checks.

I pledge to you right now that we will work on a bipartisan basis in Washington to make sure that federal, state, and local law enforcement have the resources they need to take on the Mexican drug cartels, and that the federal government is working in synch with its state and local counterparts.

You know that state and local law enforcement is where the rubber meets the road. What we do at the federal level will have

fleeting impact if we don't work in concert with you, our partners in this war against the Mexican drug cartels, which is why we are here today to listen.

Thank you.

Senator McCain?