

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Bunker, Pamela L. and Bunker, Robert J. "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?" *Small Wars Journal*. 27 May 2010. smallwarsjournal.com: 1-4.

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SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?

Pamela L. Bunker and Robert J. Bunker

Conventional wisdom holds that narco gang and drug cartel violence in Mexico is primarily secular in nature. This viewpoint has been recently challenged by the activities of the La Familia cartel and some Los Zetas, Gulfo, and other cartel adherents of the cult of Santa Muerte (Saint Death) by means of religious tenets of ‘divine justice’ and instances of tortured victims and ritual human sacrifice offered up to a dark deity, respectively. Severed heads thrown onto a disco floor in Michoacan in 2005 and burnt skull imprints in a clearing in a ranch in the Yucatán Peninsula in 2008 only serve to highlight the number of such incidents which have now taken place. Whereas the infamous ‘black cauldron’ incident in Matamoros in 1989, where American college student Mark Kilroy’s brain was found in a ritual *nganga* belonging to a local narco gang, was the rare exception, such spiritual-like activities have now become far more frequent.

These activities only serve to further elaborate concerns amongst scholars, including Sullivan, Elkus, Brands, Manwaring, and the authors, over societal warfare breaking out across the Americas.¹ This warfare— manifesting itself in ‘criminal insurgencies’ derived from groups of gang, cartel, and mercenary networks— promotes new forms of state organization drawn from criminally based social and political norms and behaviors. These include a value system derived from illicit narcotics use, killing for sport and pleasure, human trafficking and slavery, dysfunctional perspectives on women and family life, and a habitual orientation to violence and total disregard for modern civil society and democratic freedoms. This harkens back to Peter’s thoughts concerning the emergence of a ‘new warrior class’ and, before that, van Creveld’s ‘non-trinitarian warfare’ projections.²

A recent insight, gained by the authors after the conclusion of a major research project on Mexican drug groups,³ is that this insurgency has at its basis a spiritual, if not religious, component that threatens the underlying foundations of our modern Western value system. This component is derived from the well known cartel technique of offering an individual *¿Plata O Plomo?*—take our silver or we will fill you with our lead. As a tactic taken by groups with a theological bent, such as La Familia, this offer becomes Faustian, join us and in the process give up your soul or die, a choice historically associated with incidents of religious conversion at the tip of a sword. That technique is typically carried out by young religions, such as militant Christianity and Islam, during their expansionistic phases. These post-battlefield mass conversions are considered by the victors as actually saving the souls of those joining the righteous ranks of God’s chosen. A side benefit of such practices is of course to replenish the ranks of the fallen and to vastly increase the size of a religious movement via an ever-expanding holy war. Compare the size and power of Islam in the 7th century to that of the religion a couple

of centuries later and the historical benefits of this process become readily apparent. Even Christianity, with Emperor Constantine's conversion prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in the early 4th century, has benefited from a similar process with the subsequent mass religious conversion of the Roman state and its legions.

In the context of the Mexican cartels, and to a more limited extent the earlier Colombian ones, what we are now witnessing is a process in which criminal conversion by the bullet is taking place. This is an allied concept to that discussed by Manwaring with regard to the 'Sullivan-Bunker Cocktail' that targets state sovereignty by eating away at institutions of a state.⁴ Individuals targeted by the *¿Plata O Plomo?* cartel technique can either choose to embrace criminality by taking the bribe offered or be killed. While individuals are allowed 'free will' and can choose death with a clear conscious over that of embracing criminality, Hobbes typically has a clear advantage over Rosseau when the final decision is made. Thus, in accepting the bribe, such individuals, while they preserve their own skins, readily compromise their values and join what is becoming a growing criminal insurgency in the Americas against the modern Westphalian state system. No moral salvation exists for those who cross the line and accept the silver of the narcos. Corruption taints the soul and we are increasingly finding ourselves besieged by growing ranks of such lost souls with their *Cuerno de Chivo* (Goat's Horn— AK-47 assault rifle) talisman in hand.

Yet, what is still missing in this conversion equation is a strong and overarching religious archetype or movement that helps to more fully unite those embracing the criminality espoused by the narco gangs, cartels, and their mercenary foot soldiers. La Familia adherents, while dramatically increasing, now only number less than ten thousand while the far more numerous cult of Santa Muerte, now ranging in number somewhere between one and five million, has more of its followers thought to still subscribe to the older and more benign forms of that religious practice. This suggests that we are nowhere near a tipping point where criminal conversion also corresponds to some sort of threatening or dark form of narco related religious conversion. What it does suggest, though, is as the *¿Plata O Plomo?* conversion technique continues to be refined and increasingly spreads in Mexico, Central America, regions of South America, and penetrates over the United States border with Mexico, it prepares the ground and creates fertile conditions for such narco spiritual potentials.

An example of this concern is that of a Los Zetas assassination cell composed of US teens working in Laredo, Texas in the 2005-2006. One of its members, hitman Gabriel Cardona, sported a large Santa Muerte tattoo on the back and open eye tattoos on his eyelids that have helped to elevate him to a 'narco mark of the beast' archetype. Religious shrines and altars, which include the burning of black candles and a few instances of blood sacrifices, have now also been tied to more extreme narco religious followers.

Honest men are increasingly accepting bribes and embracing criminality over certain death, in some instances, along with the threat of the infliction of torture. Such is the reality of day-to-day life in many of the sovereign free and cartel controlled zones that now exist in Mexico and Central America. Who can say if those who are willing to compromise their values—and in a sense have already darkened their souls—are not willing to complete the transformational process taking place and accept criminally derived forms of spirituality and religion into their

hearts? In the war over social and political organization now raging in the Americas, we must expect and prepare for these and other such contingencies.

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Notes

1. Background works include Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Cartel Evolution: Potentials and Consequences." *Transnational Organized Crime*. Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998, pp. 55-74; John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency." *Small Wars Journal*. August 2008, pp. 1-12; Hal Brands, *Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counter-Drug Policy*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009; and Max G. Manwaring, *A "New" Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009.
2. See Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class." *Parameters*. Vol. 24, No. 2. Summer 1994, pp. 16-26; and Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*. New York: The Free Press, 1991.
3. Robert J. Bunker, ed. *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. London: Routledge, 2011. Initially published a special issue of *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1. These spiritual insights represent an extension of some of the conclusions drawn in a chapter by Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker on "Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos."

4. Max G. Manwaring, *Insurgency, Terrorism & Crime*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008, pp. 116-118.

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