



Commentary: Get Ready Now

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Admiral Bobby R. Inman

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I always enjoy a day when I learn new things. And I've learned a lot of new things today.

First, law enforcement plays a critical role maintaining public safety and homeland security, and in our democracy it must operate under the law. Ongoing efforts to enhance law enforcement and improve its effectiveness are at the top of the list of things that demonstrate a functioning, viable democracy. It is evident, particularly considering our southern neighbor, that when law enforcement is corrupt or collapses, you get chaos. These challenges are also illustrated by the unrest in the Middle East.

Narcotics trafficking is at the top of our current list of worries. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, some 230 cities in our nation are distribution networks for the Mexican cartels – more than double the number of a few years ago. Think about the ramifications of that kind of distribution network within this country under the control of five competing cartels. Think about how those networks could be used if there occurs the kind of merger in Mexico between terrorists and narcotics dealers that happened in Columbia between M19 guerillas and narcotics producers. That is a sobering thought and something to contemplate.

There is a difference between a “failing” and a “failed” state. Somalia is a failed state. Yemen is close to being a failed state. I would put both Afghanistan and Pakistan in the danger zone. Mexico is a deeply troubled state with a huge criminal problem fueled by a vast amount of cash. For me,

it's not yet in the category of failing or failing. I would put it in the high-risk category.

We hear so much about controlling the border. The immigration bill proposed by President George W. Bush in 2005 was a decent try to address a very serious problem. But it went nowhere because the plea was “first, control the borders.” My fervent wish would be that those who hold that view – and I don't dispute that it is a major issue for us – were equally concerned about what flows south to those borders and not just what comes north. I take very seriously the Mexican view that they cannot win this war against the narcotics syndicates unless we can reduce the demand, reduce the flow of cash, and interdict the flow of arms. These are very serious challenges that, in my judgment, are not being dealt with effectively.

A lot of these issues are not just law enforcement concerns. They're diplomatic. They're political. How do we influence diplomatic and political communities to share our level of concern for these challenges to provide effective law enforcement?

The violence in Mexico is alarming. I tend to look at broad numbers. What I found interesting was the concentration of the cities where violence at its peak, how many of those are near our border, and the chance for overflow across the border that clearly exists. I return to the issue of a “viable democracy” and the challenge that concentrated violence puts on a democracy.

As I listened and contemplated the cyber secu-

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rity issues, I was reminded of the vast amount of information on the Internet. We usually think about it in terms of defending against cyber attacks or our ability to conduct offensive attacks. I went to a third step. How do we monitor and understand what's flowing on that vast sea of information in cyberspace? How do we know the uses to recruit prospective terrorists? Or its uses to provide command and control for the narcotics distribution networks? How much is going on that we're unable to access, understand, and share with people who can make timely decisions? One thing the Middle East has shown us is that social networks have introduced new ways to activate participation in how democracies work, particularly among the younger generation who are so fluent at it, hopefully for the good, but maybe not always. They can be very supportive and share our keen interest in law enforcement, or they can be detrimental.

We've focused on terrorism and counter-terrorism much more fervently now for almost 10 years. But what caught my attention again today was the "homegrown" issue. We focus on people trying to come into this country, but how do we get a better handle on the homegrown terrorist – the one being recruited not at the mosque but on the Internet listening to sermons and recordings. These homegrown terrorists perhaps are not as visible as they might be if they were listening to a clearly identifiable radical Imam recruiting people to jihad.

You have already detected my particular worry about criminal and terrorist interaction, having watched M19 guerillas, the producers of cocaine in Columbia, and the huge problem that presents. Uribe finally dealt with it effectively with help from the United States. I worry about the cartels that could facilitate the flow of potential terrorists into the country. That would be much harder for us to detect, especially if they can support this distribution network in 230 cities. If they went into collaboration, their ability to infiltrate people clearly would exceed what we've seen by terrorist nation-states.

I was also struck by the problem of separating

state and non-state actors, which again involves the cartels. There are other non-state actors out there in the whole terrorist sphere. And it's difficult to deal with the problem in the absence of legal frameworks. I had the privilege in the 1970s to participate in establishing the Feisel court, passing the Classified Information and Procedures Act, and creating other ways to help law enforcement and intelligence deal with challenges within the law. Our focus here is on doing what we believe needs to be done within the law to uphold the law. And how can we support legislation to close the gaps that exist?

How wise it would have been when the first prisoners were taken in Afghanistan to have created laws for dealing with what we came to call "non-state actors," terrorists who did not belong to a specific state. We would not have had this long-running debate about what to do when we got them to Guantanamo. Legislation to deal with that problem in 2003-04 would have put us in better position to deal with the rest of the world and meet future challenges. I'd like to see us think further on these non-state actors. Is there legislation that we should support that would make these problems easier to deal with it?

The overlap that arises again and again is with national security and criminal issues. It isn't either or. It's both. They are at their most troubling when they come together as a challenge.

Think about the global complexities of these problems. We've steadily become more alarmed by the violence we've seen in Mexico, the fear that it was going to overflow, and the ramifications with drug distribution gangs operating out of Austin. Yet another concern I've not focused on today is the arms that flow south, the arms that fuel this conflict.

Mexico has a national election in July 2012. Five years ago President Calderon won by 40,000 votes, and that was largely because the PRI candidate imploded during the campaign. Hugo Chavez poured vast sums of money into Lopez Obrador's campaign, and he came very close. Think about what we would be dealing with had that been the outcome of the election of 2006.

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President Calderon made some courageous decisions very early. Recognizing the vast corruption in law enforcement, he deployed the army to maintain control of essential elements to support democracy. Will his successor have the same dedication to attacking these problems? What does that foretell for us? What if the 2012 election takes a different direction and a new president is elected who is not interested in collaborating with the United States to attempt to solve the problems? What are the implications for collaboration if we get a very different outcome?

Also of concern to me is Venezuela. We know Chavez bears ill for us and looks for opportunities to implement that ill will. Consider the recent meeting when he brought in Hezbollah, Hamas, and other lawless influences. I've long worried about the essentially lawless tri-border area of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. Venezuela is much closer to us. Any kind of tie that links Chavez with the cartels could dramatically escalate the risk to us of the infiltration of terrorists into this country.

Let me underline the multiple threats – terrorism, cyber, and drugs. To have any chance of dealing with those we must have the most effective law enforcement possible. And for law enforcement to be successful, it needs access to all relevant information, wherever it's produced. It must be able to digest it and quickly act on it. It must be able to understand it and get focused for future challenges and future unknown threats. To be effective, they also need clarity of legal boundaries. How can we improve law enforcement if there are factors that limit its effectiveness? How do we generate and sustain public support to deal with these threats and challenges. Who are the audiences that we need to influence?

All of you, regardless of your positions, are influencers. I challenge you to think about what you've heard today, what you've learned today. How do we refine it to be more useful? How do we influence the political or public sector to help us deal with potentially more serious challenges ahead?