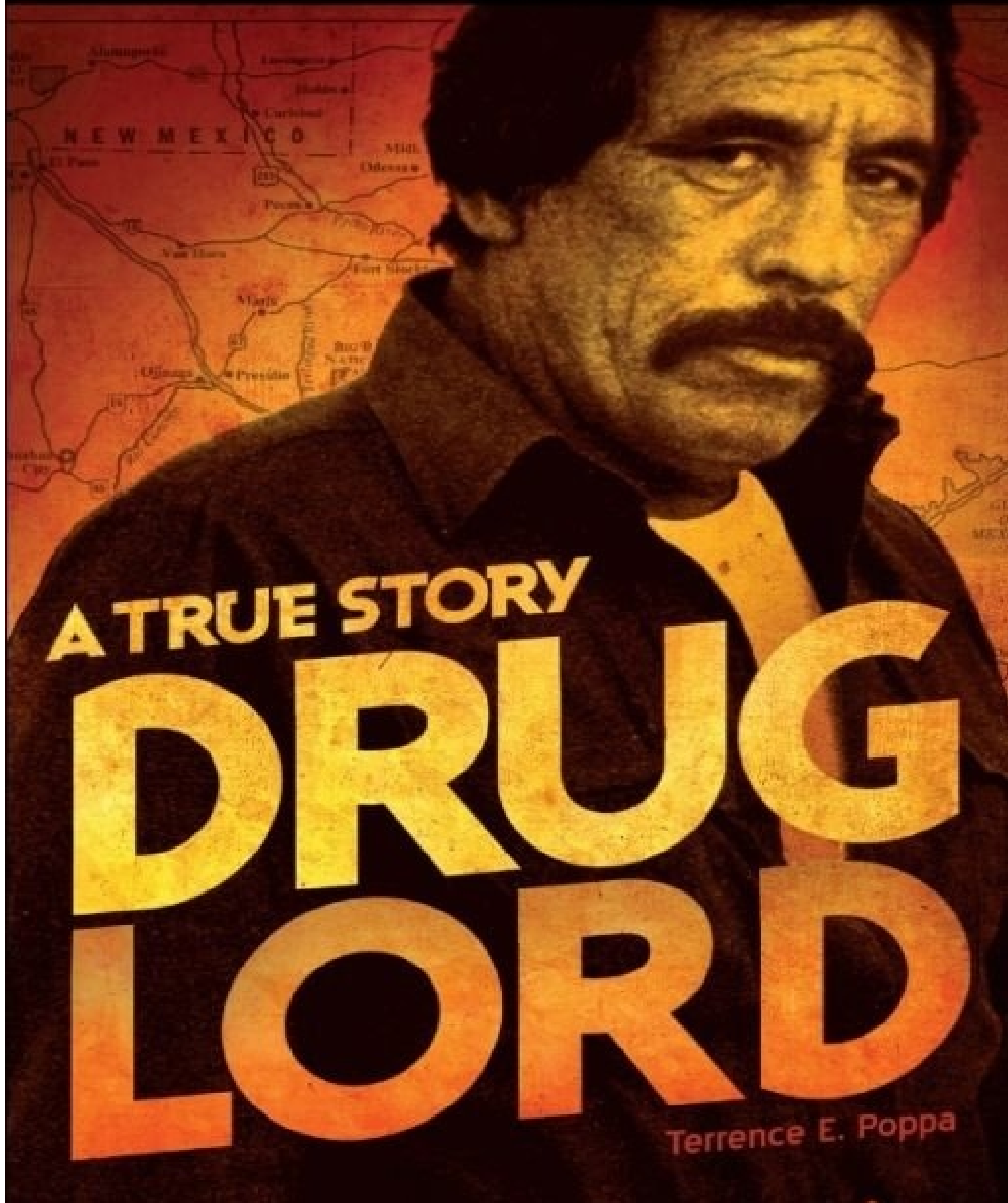


THE LIFE & DEATH OF A MEXICAN KINGPIN



A TRUE STORY

DRUG LORD

Terrence E. Poppa



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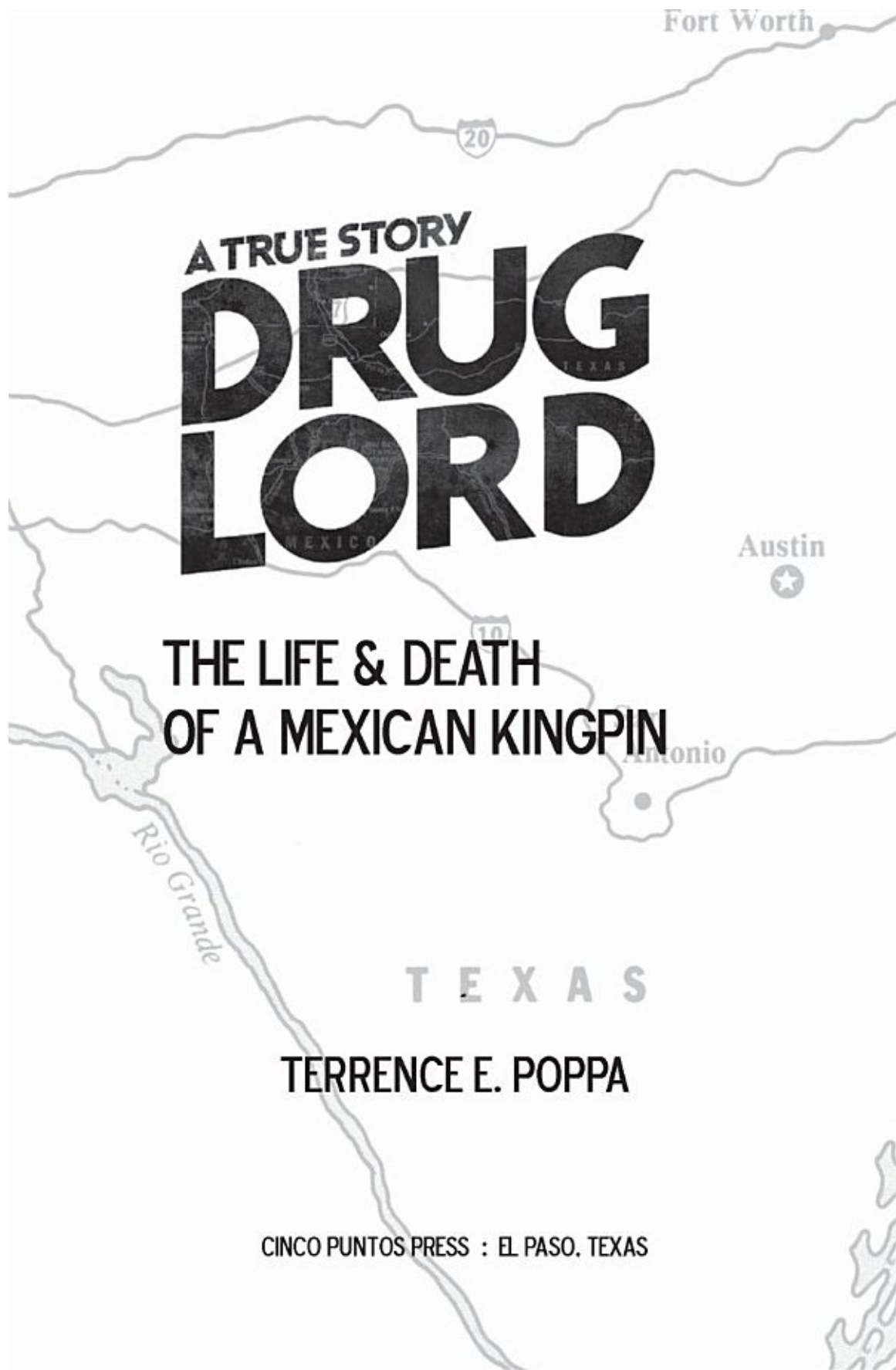
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A TRUE STORY
**DRUG
LORD**

THE LIFE & DEATH
OF A MEXICAN KINGPIN

T E X A S

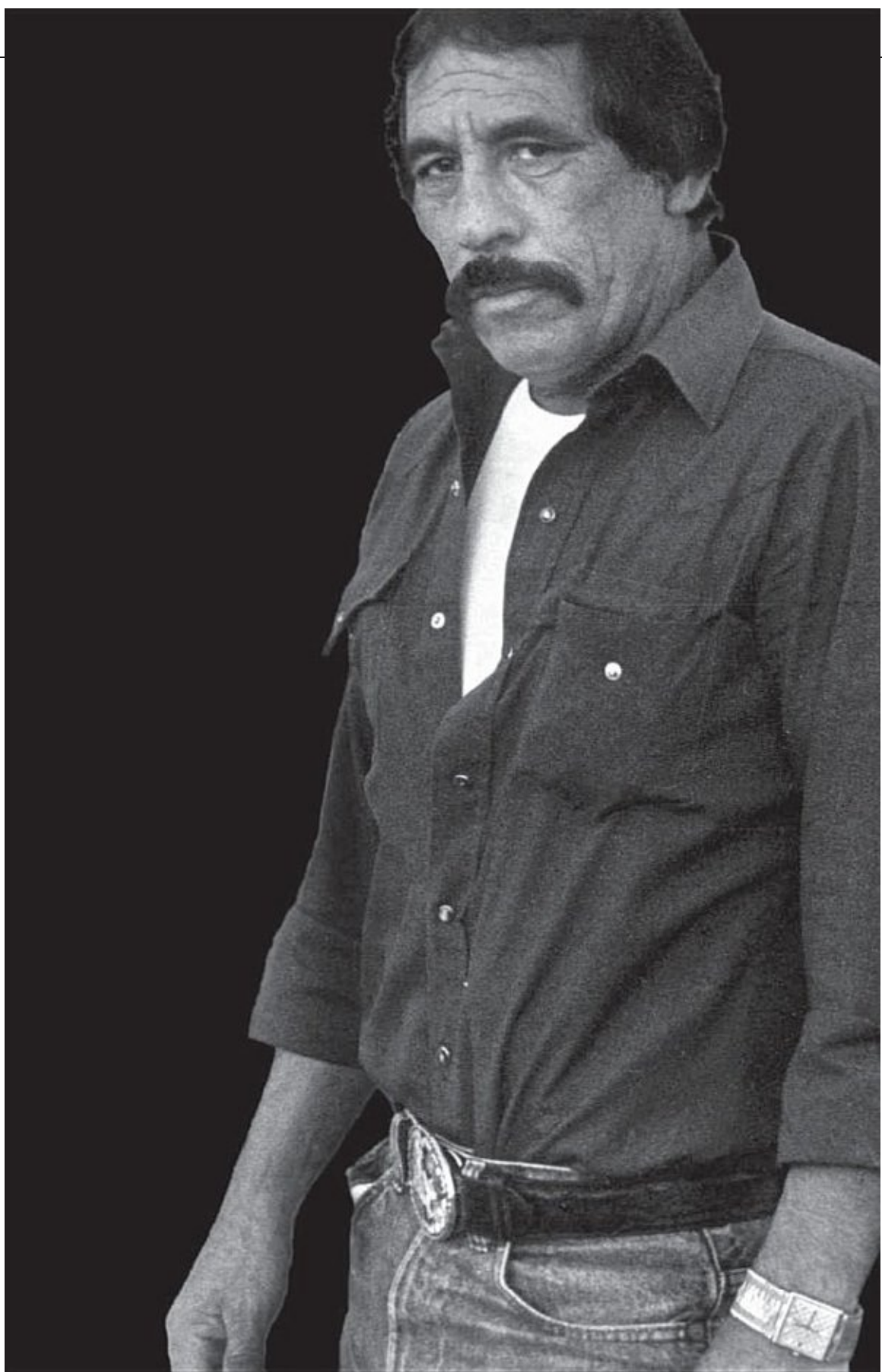
TERRENCE E. POPPA

CINCO PUNTOS PRESS : EL PASO, TEXAS

For Rick Kelly

DRUG LORD is a true story that depicts how drug trafficking worked in Mexico under the O Regime, which came to an end in the year 2000.

Though some names have been omitted and several changed to protect the innocent, the characters and scenes are real. The dialogue was taken word for word from interviews with participants, including the chief participant of them all, Pablo Acosta.



PREFACE

Charles Bowden

This book could function as an owner's manual for the Mexican drug cartels. Here we find the first good description of the *plaza*—that arrangement where the Mexican government seeks a partner to supervise all criminal activity in a city. And how to maintain discipline by killing everyone connected to a lost load lest a traitor survive. And also the history of the shift of power from Columbia to Mexico, when American efforts hampered the pathways in Florida and made Mexico the trampolin for cocaine shipments into the U.S. markets.

I remember in the mid-nineties paying fifty dollars for a copy of *Drug Lord* in a used bookstore in El Paso and being damned happy to get my hands on it.

Terrence Poppa was a reporter for the *El Paso Herald-Post*. In the eighties, he captured the rise and fall of Pablo Acosta in Ojinaga, the border town across from Presidio, Texas. By that act, he wrote the history of the key moment when flights of cocaine from Columbia entered the Mexican economy. He interviewed the players, got down their life histories and made the indelible point that the people written off by their own country as ill-educated bumpkins were creative and were turning power on its head in the nation. Acosta's slaughter by Mexican comandante Guillermo Gonzalez Calderoni, with the help of the FBI, ended this kind of access. Since then, becoming famous and talking to the press—which Acosta did—has been seen as a fatal decision. And since then, the Mexican drug industry has become a source of thirty to fifty billion dollars of foreign currency a year for the Mexican economy—second only to oil, and now the oil fields of Mexico are collapsing.

His book has to be ignored by those who run countries and work for agencies. While they sketch monoliths they call cartels, Poppa actually describes in detail a world of shifting alliances, small pools of operators knit together, and billions of dollars sloshing around in dusty towns and cities. He is the historian of the actual fabric of life as opposed to being the mouthpiece for government rhetoric.

If you wish to be as ignorant and dishonest as your public officials when they mouth the pieties of the War on Drugs, then avoid this book at all costs.

But if you want to know how it works and why it works and why it will keep on working, read this book.

Besides, it is an adventure story as the working poor of Mexico claw their way to a new golden hell. Since it was first published, only the names have changed.

This is the story behind the lies of the headlines.

The business goes on, the slaughtered dead pile up, the U.S. agencies continue to ratchet up the budgets, the prisons grow larger and all the real rules of the game are in this book—some kind of masterpiece.

And it's a damn good read too.

INTRODUCTION

This book came about because of the kidnapping of an American newspaper photographer by a Juarez drug trafficker, a brutal and unprecedented event that caused an international scandal and brought about the downfall of one of the major drug traffickers of the time.

Until that event, I never had much of an interest in the subject of drugs. Drug trafficking was part of the background noise of the El Paso-Juarez region where I worked as a reporter. It was low-keyed even in its violence, and it did not draw too much attention to itself. My journalistic work, which had begun for the *El Paso Herald-Post* in 1984, focused primarily on reporting on a political movement in northern Mexico that was challenging the entrenched one-party system that had governed Mexico since 1929. Juarez, a mere ten blocks south of the newspaper on the other side of the Rio Grande, was the scene of what today would be called a “color” revolution—a democratic movement that used the non-violent resistance tactics practiced by Mahatma Gandhi to oust the British from India.

The movement, which was capable of mobilizing tens of thousands of people for its protests and demonstrations, had serious gripes: six decades of control by a single political party had resulted in a staggering degree of corruption throughout Mexico and was responsible for the generalized poverty of the country. By some estimates, a third of all tax money ended up looted by politicians and bureaucrats through one kickback scheme or another, ensuring a continuation of chronic poverty. The political system kept itself going by allowing opposition parties to form and compete for power, but rigged elections so that the official party candidate always won. The aim was to burn up the energy and resources of opponents in fruitless campaigns yet gain the appearance of democratic legitimacy by holding elections. The electoral fraud techniques were so finely tuned that elections could be engineered to whatever percentage the government party thought appropriate for a given race. The opposition movement, therefore, focused its efforts on breaking the cycle of electoral fraud by exposing its mechanisms, backed up by massive street demonstrations.

As I eventually came to understand, the corruption that pushed Mexican citizens to the streets in protest went far beyond the looting of the public treasury; it was much deeper and far more insidious, causing harm not only to the people of Mexico but to the citizens of all of North America. This dark face of Mexico involved not just collusion with organized crime, but actually encouraging and regulating it. It was a system of command and control that ran through the country like the arteries and veins of a body, with its heart in Mexico City.

It was against this background of state-sponsored crime and high political drama that the kidnapping occurred, an unintended consequence of a series of stories on organized crime that the newspaper had published. The reports focused primarily on American Mafia enterprises, but since I was the Mexico reporter, I was asked to contribute a piece about crime in Juarez. That meant drug trafficking. When I first began my work in Juarez, several Mexican journalists had cautioned me that if I wanted to stay out of trouble I should avoid three subjects: political corruption, police corruption, and drug trafficking. Ignoring the advice, I wrote a story about a fancy nine-story hotel a Juarez drug trafficker was building on one of the main boulevards. The story was published and was picked up by a wire service.

A few days later, someone from faraway Seattle called and said the *Seattle Times* wanted to print the story, but needed a photograph of the hotel. The newspaper sent one of its freelance photographers

Al Gutierrez. As it turned out, the photographer did not know what he was getting himself into. The *Herald-Post* editors assumed he had read the hotel story and would take appropriate precautions. But he had not read it and treated the job like any other assignment. He took photographs from the street, then asked permission to photograph inside the construction site. He ended up being brought to the very drug trafficker who had been exposed in the story, Gilberto Ontiveros. The hapless photographer realized only too late that he was now a prisoner just several miles from the newspaper that had sent him. Ontiveros and his cronies subjected the photographer to a brutal interrogation: Was he really a newspaper photographer, or was he actually from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)? They beat him, threw him down a staircase, put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger—it wasn't loaded, but he didn't know that—and threatened to rape him and scald him with boiling water if he didn't tell them what they wanted to know.

If this kidnapping had occurred in the Juarez of today, the photographer would have been murdered and his body, "bearing signs of torture," dumped on a street corner. But this savage action was intended as a warning to the American media to back off, and it needed a live messenger. Instead of killing Gutierrez, his kidnapers drove him out to the desert and dumped him—twelve hours after abducting him. Battered and frightened, he made his way back to El Paso, reaching the newsroom an hour before the morning editors arrived. He left a note about what had happened. The last line said, "And tell Poppa they're going to kill him."

To use a worn expression, the kidnapping was a wake-up call. Drug traffickers really were the dangerous people that Mexican journalists claimed. As I quickly learned, they operated with impunity through impenetrable arrangements with power. They could literally get away with murder.

The kidnapping and torture of the newspaper photographer, however, backfired. News organizations on both sides of the border closed ranks behind the *Herald-Post*, whose editors rose to the occasion through the use of aggressive journalism and savvy politicking. Among other actions, the editor-in-chief, Jay Ambrose, fired off letters of complaint to the governors of Texas and Chihuahua, to the presidents and attorneys general of both countries, and to Texas congressmen and senators.

For my part, I lodged a criminal complaint against Ontiveros with the state prosecutor in Juarez. Just as writing about these people could be dangerous, filing a criminal complaint against a drug trafficker was simply not done in Mexico. It invited reprisals. But it had to be done, if only for its symbolic value. Ontiveros had brutalized an innocent man and had threatened to take my life, and because of a newspaper story. It was a personal challenge, but more importantly, it was also a matter of free speech. Was the American media going to be intimidated into silence?

As the pressures grew, it became impossible for Mexico to sweep the incident under the rug. Three days after the kidnapping, the Mexican government sent a team of agents headed by Comandante Guillermo Gonzalez Calderoni, the same federal police commander who later killed Pablo Acosta, to arrest Ontiveros.

My education about the true nature of the Mexican political system was just beginning. I was soon tipped off about the involvement of the Chihuahua state police in the theft of American automobiles. Someone showed me a bunch of vehicles—newer SUVs, trucks, sedans, all with American license plates—parked around the state police headquarters. My source said they had all been stolen from towns in New Mexico and Texas by gangs of car thieves who operated under the wing of the state police, which allowed their activities provided the thieves turned over a percentage of the stolen vehicles to the agency. State policemen, the very men who were responsible for investigating such

crimes, drove them as if they were personal property. Many of these vehicles even ended up being driven by some of the Juarez journalists, who accepted them with the understanding they were not to expose police crimes.

With a newspaper photographer in tow, I staked out the police headquarters from a nearby balcony. We got a slew of photographs and license plate numbers. The plates were easy to trace: all were recently stolen from Texas or New Mexico, some within the previous few days. The stories were published, along with photographs of Mexican state police agents driving them. The stories resulted in more death threats. Two U.S. Customs agents dropped by the newspaper to warn about the threats and said they should be taken seriously. "Vary your routine, and when you're driving keep an eye on who's behind you," was the advice I was given.

The plot, as they say, was thickening. But how do you unravel a plot as thick as this one? How do you figure out the inner workings of collusion between crime and government? It had to have a face, but whose? Was it just the local state or federal police commander? Was a governor involved, or a powerful politician in Mexico City? So far, all I had was a vague Polaroid snapshot whose image had barely formed. It would take several more years of research before that image came through clearly.

Given the results of its reporting, the *Herald-Post* was in high spirits and had good reasons to be proud: a notorious drug trafficker was in jail, and a major Chihuahua police agency had been shaken to the core. Certainly, this kind of reporting did not have to end there, and it did not end there. Following the kidnapping, one of my colleagues at the *Herald-Post*, Joe Old, developed information regarding a suspected cocaine smuggling organization operating out of Ojinaga, Mexico, a Rio Grande town about 250 miles downriver from El Paso. The name of the drug trafficker that came up: Pablo Acosta.

Not much was known about Acosta other than the fact that he was a DEA fugitive who had been operating a vast crime organization from his Mexican sanctuary for at least ten years. The DEA tagged him as vicious, with little regard for human life. What made him of interest to the newspaper was the fact that American federal police suspected he had branched into large-scale cocaine smuggling. If true, this was big news. Until that time cocaine was overwhelmingly being smuggled into the United States through Florida. However, there had been recent cocaine busts in Alamogordo, New Mexico, and in El Paso of 250 pounds of cocaine hidden in the propane tanks of pickup trucks, shipments that appeared to have originated from Mexico, not Florida. Another 500 pounds had been recently seized in Los Angeles, also in propane tanks. Were the Colombian traffickers opening up a new smuggling front? Was Pablo Acosta involved?

Because of the death threats, this was a good time for me to get out of town. I was sent on the road with a mission: to find out what I could about Pablo Acosta and his organization. I visited every courthouse in West Texas and southeastern New Mexico that had a sliver of information in court files, and I quizzed every local, state and federal cop I could find in the hope of piecing together a bigger picture. I kept digging, turning up some useful information here and there. Eventually, I was able to create a profile of his operations on the American side of the border and compile a list of twenty-some killings attributed to Acosta and his drug faction, murders committed both in the United States and Mexico. However, I was unable to get anything more than rumor and speculation that he operated with the blessing of the Mexican government. Where was the intel? Where was the smoking gun? I concluded that if I was going to get anywhere with this story, I needed to talk to the man himself. Maybe Acosta felt so secure in his position he would say something about his protected arrangement. I found a way to get a line to him and sent him a message: "They say all sorts of things about you. Would you care to give your side of the story?" He sent word back: "Come to Ojinaga, and I will talk to you."

This meeting is covered in Chapter 23. I spent two days with Acosta, a man who was clearly on his way down because of a serious addiction to crack cocaine. It took some prodding, but he did in fact admit that paying off federal police was part of his business expenses. He mostly talked about drug smuggling, violence, and the good deeds he paid for with drug profits. It amounted to color, and he was indeed a flamboyant border bandit and all-around bad guy. Anyone who has seen the movie *Three Amigos*, starring Steve Martin, Chevy Chase and Martin Short, will remember the bandit name El Guapo. Pablo Acosta was El Guapo, gregarious and fond of a good joke, but deadly if you crossed him or got in the way of his activities.

The newspaper stories came out a month later in a three-part series, blowing Acosta's relatively low profile. The admission he had made about federal police being part of his overhead was extremely embarrassing to the Mexican government. Within days, the same federal commander who had arrested Gilberto Ontiveros in Juarez was sent to Ojinaga to take Acosta dead or alive. I felt bad when I heard about Acosta's death, realizing my reports were the trigger, but in fact my reports merely accelerated his end. His addiction to crack cocaine had sealed his fate much more than talking to an American journalist. Traffickers even more ruthless than him were waiting behind the scenes to take over. If the Mexican government had not killed him, they would have.

Because of the drama of his death, I saw that a good book could be written about him. I eventually took a leave of absence from journalism for a year and a half to research and write it. *The Drug Lords* is the result of that research. The first edition was published in 1990, with a second edition appearing in 1998.

What I learned forms the backbone of what you are about to read, that traffickers like Pablo Acosta operated under a system that was almost like a franchise. They had to pay a monthly fee to the handlers for the right to work a specific zone. It was a form of private taxation based on the volume of sales, with the money going to people in power. As noted in the book, traffickers were often given federal police badges. The military, the attorney general of Mexico and his federal police, the International Government Ministry and its secret police, various governors, and many other powerful people were involved. The money generated by the grunts at the base like Pablo Acosta flowed up the ladder, and much of it reached the highest levels of power, usually including the president of Mexico.

Everything that I learned about the Mexican narco-political system I learned the hard way. I also learned that our own government knew about it, too, but kept a lid on it. Federal agents up and down the border were told to keep their mouths shut if they valued their careers. At the time, the United States was pursuing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. If these truths about the Mexican government became widely known, the United States Congress would never have ratified the NAFTA agreement, which it did early in Bill Clinton's first term.

The people of Mexico, meanwhile, continued their arduous labor of bringing an end to the one-party system that had brought about such unfortunate consequences for the majority of Mexicans. In the year 2000, their efforts paid off with the election of an opposition candidate, Vicente Fox, as president of Mexico. It was a major coup for democracy brought about by the relentless labor of countless Mexicans.

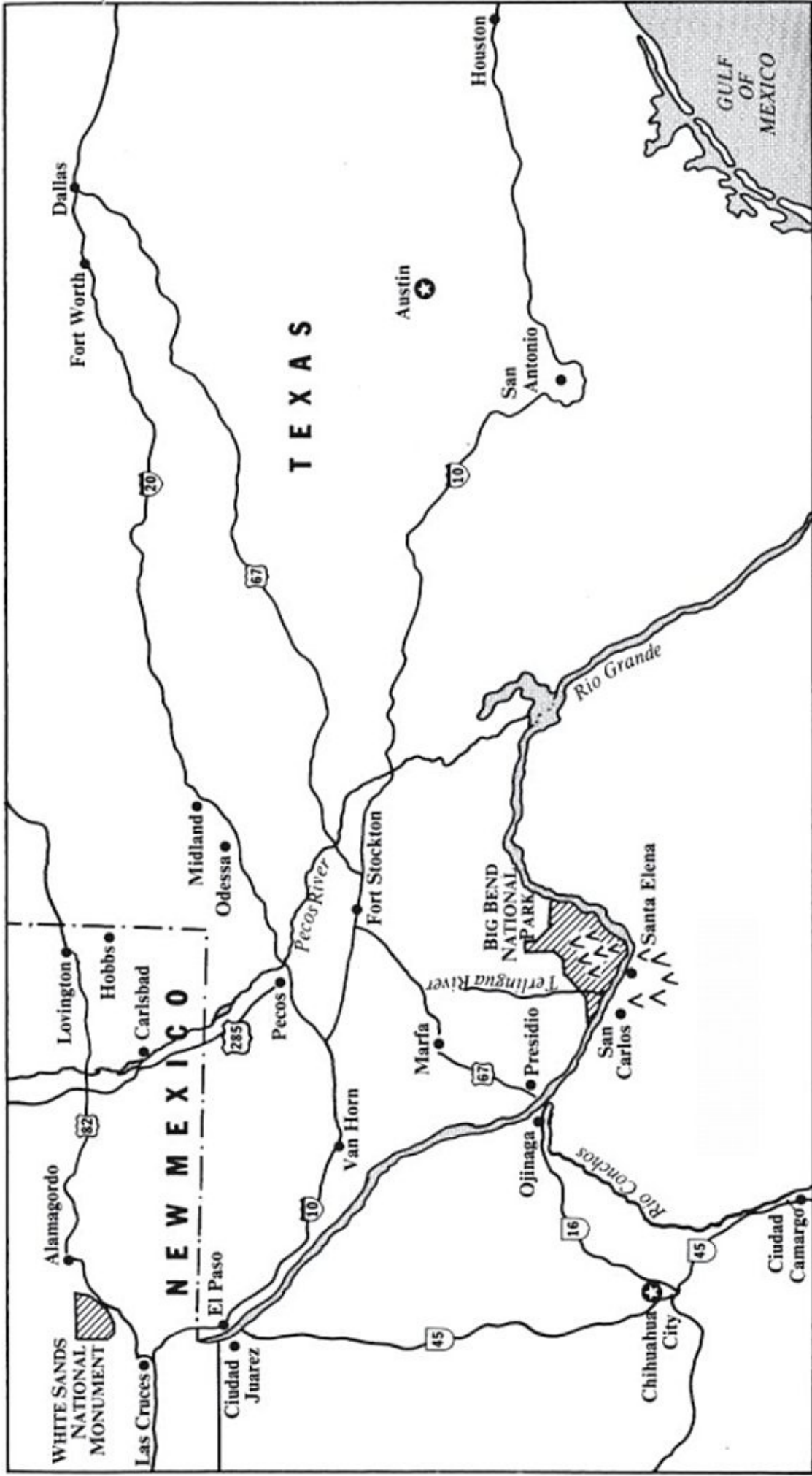
The democratic transformation brought an end to the way organized crime did business in Mexico. This book, therefore, does not claim to offer a picture of how drug trafficking works in Mexico today. It is now de-coupled from the top levels of government, but organized crime has become even stronger than before, fueled by the vast and incessant flow of drug money from the United States. It has learned the power of terror, and the day may come when it can undermine the precious accomplishment of the Mexican people—their democracy.

Drug Lord is an accurate portrait of the recent past, of the system that gave birth to Pablo Acosta. But it is also a vision of what could come about once again.

—Terrence Poppa, 2011

Part One

LA PLAZA



FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO A CONFIDENTIAL 223-PAGE DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION REPORT, THE PABLO ACOSTA ORGANIZATION. APRIL 1986.

A costa directs his organization from Ojinaga with an iron fist and does not tolerate rebellion either overt or covert. If a leak is suspected, or if a member or associate fails to act as expected, they are removed quickly and permanently. He has a strict enforcement policy, which is killing the delinquent customer.

Acosta takes a personal and active interest in any bad business practices, or talking by his enemies and competitors. His killings are very flamboyant and are done in a distinctive manner as an example to others. He is a vicious and extremely dangerous person who has little regard for human life if it stands in the way of his operation.

Although he is small in stature, he does not hesitate to become involved in a gun battle with his peers or with law enforcement personnel. Acosta has put out several contracts on competitors and has been implicated in two murders in Hobbs, New Mexico, and four in Mexico.

His organization has been linked to at least twenty murders since 1982, and the total may even be double that number. Reports are that he has begun to arm his members with Teflon-coated ammunition capable of penetrating body-armor-type bulletproof vests worn by law enforcement officers. Acosta himself is known to wear a bulletproof vest and usually travels with or is followed by heavily armed bodyguards.

Intelligence (unconfirmed) indicates that Pablo Acosta and his organization have "high level" protection that reaches from Mexico City to the governor of Chihuahua (Oscar Ornelas). At the local level in Northern Chihuahua and Ojinaga, he is believed to be protected by the Mexican general in charge of the area. The MFJP (Mexican Federal Judicial Police) in the Ojinaga area has been reportedly composed of some of his men and directly controlled by him through one of its comandantes. In other cases, some of his other men were reported to have MFJP credentials to cover both their activities and their carrying weapons in public.

OJINAGA

When you first see Ojinaga from the American side, it is after you drive through rugged mountains on a two-lane highway from Marfa and begin the long descent into the Rio Grande basin. There, ten miles in the bluey distance, lies the town on a plain on the Mexican side of the river. From the distance one sees huge dust devils swirling across the scorched fields outside of town, while plumes of black smoke from the municipal dump billow high into the sky. OJ, as the residents of the American side of the river like to call it, looks like a town under siege.

Like the river villages of today such as Lomas de Arena, Santa Elena, or Boquillas, Ojinaga has once been little more than a collection of adobe hovels at the edge of the Rio Grande. It was through this parched border town that John Reed, the impassioned chronicler of violent change, entered Mexico for his reportage on the Mexican Revolution. He described the Ojinaga of those savage days as a town of “white dusty streets piled high with filth and fodder.”

The later Ojinaga grew under the stimulus of trade, both legal and illegal. As isolated from authority on the Mexican side as Presidio, its little sister on the American side, Ojinaga became an ideal route for smugglers pushing contraband of all kinds. During Prohibition, it was bootleg liquor and *sotol*, a potent cactus moonshine. During the Second World War, airmen and soldiers based at a bomber field outside of Marfa gave a boost to bordertown commerce by spending freely in the downtown shops and in the cantinas of the *zona de tolerancia*, the red light district.

Following the war, heroin began coming through in greater and greater amounts. Smuggled from the slopes of Sinaloa on Mexico’s west coast, where peasants learned that opium poppies brought a higher price than corn, the gum extracted from the poppy made its way through the sierras of Chihuahua to clandestine laboratories in the mountains above the mining town of Parral to transform it into heroin. From there the heroin was brought to the United States via Ojinaga. There was never any shortage of people willing to smuggle the refined product into the United States.

The Ojinaga that Pablo Acosta came to dominate was born of the ashes of Domingo Aranda, an old-time smuggler and drug dealer who was burned to death one day on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Aranda was one of the most successful of the heroin smugglers and was possibly the first drug lord of the region. At the very least, he was the first of the succession of *padrinos* who are remembered today. A tall, broad-shouldered peasant from rural Ojinaga, Aranda got his start as a *contrabandista* during World War II escorting mule trains laden with tires, sugar, coffee and just about anything else that happened to be rationed or was in short supply in the United States. With forty, fifty, or even one hundred mules, these caravans plodded through the lunar canyons of the Texas Big Bend under the cover of darkness to avoid U.S. Customs patrols. Smugglers made use of ancient signaling methods to communicate over long distances. Ranchers in the Big Bend area knew what it meant when they saw bonfires on mountaintops late at night or the distant flashes of mirrors by day.

After the war, Domingo Aranda moved from Ojinaga and settled in Portales, a farm town on the plains of southeastern New Mexico. Rationing—and therefore smuggling opportunities—ended with

the war and like other out-of-work contrabanders he took up smuggling black tar, the brown, clayey, poorly refined heroin coming out of the Parral mountains. With his sons as apprentices, Aranda ran the heroin from the sierras to the Rio Grande, then followed the old contraband routes north across private ranch roads and unpaved county roads. In the United States, he avoided detection by distributing only to trusted Mexican pushers who in turn sold chiefly to Mexican addicts. From his modest home in Portales, he developed distribution networks in Albuquerque and as far north as Chicago.

At first, Domingo Aranda specialized in heroin, but as the anti-war generation began to emerge in the United States, he took advantage of the new opportunity and branched into marijuana. By the standards of the early 1960s, he was a very successful drug trafficker.

Aranda might have continued operating his business from the New Mexico farm community indefinitely if he had not killed one of his business partners there in 1969, forcing him to flee back to Ojinaga. The story police learned was that Aranda shot Pancho Carreon in self-defense during an argument that started in the middle of a card game. They were drinking heavily and the joking took an insulting turn: Carreon supposedly made a crude remark about Aranda's sister. When Aranda jumped to his feet and threatened to kill him, Carreon lunged across the table with a knife. As he fell back to avoid the blade, Aranda whipped out a .25-caliber pistol from his boot and shot Carreon in the mouth, severing an artery. Carreon choked to death on his own blood. Aranda made a run for it back to Mexico, and from then on he based his operation in Ojinaga.

The Ojinaga of 1969 was a struggling border town of ten thousand people. Like most Mexican towns, it had the usual cluster of historic buildings around a quaint central square with a church at one end. The tidy, comfortable homes of the well-to-do were on paved side streets. Farther from the center began the unpaved roads that wound through neighborhoods full of the sagging, eroded adobe homes of the less fortunate.

At the time, telephone numbers were three digits and operators used plug-in switchboards. Old telephone operators there recall the misdirected calls they frequently got from the United States as evidence of the remoteness of the border town. "No, *señor*, this is not Okinawa," the operators would patiently explain. "Okinawa is in Japan. You have reached Ojinaga, Mexico. *O-hee-na'-ga, May'-he-co!*"

The few phones reserved for international calls at the downtown telephone company hung from the walls. In self-imposed exile to avoid prosecution for the killing of Pancho Carreon, Aranda transformed the musty telephone office into his operations center. Some of the former switchboard operators still remember how Aranda used to come early in the morning and spend several hours leaning against the wall or sitting on a chair while making phone calls. He had a habit of bending his head down and sticking a finger in one ear whenever the noise in the crowded room got too loud. The operators could easily hear Aranda's loud voice, but they never could decipher the veiled language. He always paid for the expensive calls from a thick wad of dollars and pesos he pulled from his pocket. "Cattle broker," he told anyone curious enough to inquire about his occupation.

About 1968, before the killing of his partner and his own flight to Mexico, Domingo Aranda brought new blood into the organization in the form of a tall, square-faced peasant from the Ojinaga area named Manuel Carrasco. Born in 1934 in a village outside of Ojinaga, Carrasco had married one of Aranda's nieces. Like many of the farm workers from the adobe hamlets surrounding Ojinaga, Carrasco did seasonal work in the cotton fields of West Texas and New Mexico, then returned to

Mexico to work the family corn field. Aranda first employed Carrasco as a “mule” to smuggle small caches of heroin into the United States from Ojinaga, but soon began trusting him with deliveries of marijuana and heroin as far as Chicago.

Manuel Carrasco was bright and ambitious. During his trips to Chicago and other big cities, he came to realize that the market in the United States went far beyond the vision of his *jefe*. The 60s counterculture seemed hell-bent on smoking, snorting or injecting every mind-altering substance known to pharmacopoeia, and they were paying real money for it, particularly on the coasts and in big midwestern cities. With a lot of hustle, a man could make himself a fortune just supplying run-of-the-mill drugs like heroin and marijuana. Manuel could see that his uncle-in-law was content to supply just one, two or three small-time distributors in each of the communities he dealt with.

After working a few years under Aranda’s tutelage, Carrasco began making separate deals with some of Aranda’s customers and soon forged connections with other buyers. Before long, he was operating an organization that was completely independent of Aranda that reached as far as California.

Over time, Carrasco also managed to connect with Aranda’s marijuana and heroin suppliers in Parral, a mining town in southeastern Chihuahua, and he later set up heroin laboratories of his own in mountain hideaways southwest of Chihuahua City. State police in New Mexico who tracked Carrasco’s rise believe his organization eventually became sophisticated enough to fly *goma*, the opium poppy extract, from the growing fields of Sinaloa to his laboratories in the remote mountain regions of Chihuahua. From there he flew the refined product to desert landing sites around Ojinaga. With his better organizational skills and boundless ambition, Carrasco in a few years came to dominate the narcotics trade in the Ojinaga region.

Domingo Aranda, meanwhile, suffered reverses when several valuable drug shipments were busted in the United States. Like a roll of the dice in the board games that force a player back to the starting point, these financial misfortunes were so devastating that he ended up seeking work from Manuel Carrasco, his former runner.

Then one day in 1973, Aranda was murdered and his body torched on the banks of the Rio Grande outside of Ojinaga, a crime whose ruthlessness horrified Ojinaga and signaled the beginning of a new era of drug trafficking.

According to one explanation for the murder, Aranda was killed by one of Pancho Carreon’s sons to avenge the shooting of their father years earlier in New Mexico. The Carreon sons had put out a contract for Aranda, but while he was still in control of Ojinaga crime, no one dared act on it. When Manuel Carrasco became the crime godfather of Ojinaga, Aranda could not be killed without the drug lord’s consent. The Carreons, the story goes, obtained that consent by convincing Carrasco that Aranda was skimming off his loads.

Another version related that Aranda had stolen money from Carrasco after learning of a stash of large-denomination greenbacks Carrasco kept under his bed, hidden in a compartment built into the box spring. Aranda was eager to re-establish himself but needed capital, but he made the mistake of bringing a Chihuahua State cop with him to acquire the money. The *judicial*, as Mexican state and federal policemen are called, told his comandante about the theft. The comandante, a friend of Manuel Carrasco, reported it to Carrasco.

Whatever the motive, Carrasco set up the murder one evening in 1973 by asking Aranda to help him deliver a load of marijuana to the river’s edge down by El Mulato, a village across the river from Redford, Texas. Some buyers were supposedly waiting for the shipment near the river. The two men drove down the Rio Grande valley with the marijuana in the back of Carrasco’s truck. When they arrived, it was late at night, and some men were milling around in front of the headlights of a pickup truck.

parked by the water. As they walked up to the group, Aranda recognized one of the Carreon sons and realized it was a set up. The way the incident was told to New Mexico state narcotics agents, Aranda was shot in the spine while running for his life. He staggered and fell face down. The men drew gasoline from one of the trucks and dug a small ditch around Aranda's writhing body. The wounded smuggler begged for his life as the men piled branches on him and then poured the gasoline. "Manuel, what you're doing isn't human," Aranda pleaded. Carrasco struck a match and flicked it, and the exploding gasoline sent flames shooting high above.

If there were cries of agony, they could not have been heard above the roar of the blaze as the pyre sucked up air like a gigantic blast furnace.

Someone had brought six-packs of Budweiser. The men stood around drinking in the light of the fire. When the flames died down, they buried what was left of Aranda, loaded the marijuana into the back of the Carreon truck, secured the load under tarpaulins and drove across the shallow river.

Domingo Aranda's body was later found buried under a few inches of sand. American police who saw the Polaroids said nothing was left of the trafficker but a charred torso with stumps where the limbs had been. Later, it was rumored that a finger and an ear had been chopped off and sent to Aranda's family in Portales.

Even before the murder, Manuel Carrasco had earned the nickname *La Vibora*—The Snake. Some attributed it to his business methods; others said it was because his eyes had once turned yellow from hepatitis and the coloration had reminded someone of a desert rattlesnake.

Carrasco's parting words to his accomplices following Aranda's death were: "That is what will happen to anyone who tries to cross The Snake."

The murder of Domingo Aranda sealed La Vibora's control over the region's crime on both sides of the border. With the flick of a match, he became the first of a line of powerful and often brutal drug lords of the northern desert.

COUP D'ETAT

The people of Ojinaga became aware of how powerful Carrasco had become when nothing was done about the murder of Domingo Aranda. Following the killing, Carrasco's influence with authorities seemed, if anything, to be on the upswing. When a new general took over the Ojinaga garrison, Carrasco was frequently seen with him in public. The general, a former cavalry officer with a fondness for racehorses, was soon observed trotting around town mounted on a thoroughbred that the drug lord had given to him. The general had a glass eye, which gave rise to jokes that he was the right man for the job. How much easier to turn a blind eye to all of La Vibora's drug smuggling!

The word in Ojinaga was that Carrasco was paying a total of \$100,000 a month for protection, a payoff that allowed him to conduct his activities without fear of arrest. No one knew for sure who the recipient of this alleged sum of money was, but the townspeople drew their own conclusions.

The year after Aranda's murder, the people of Ojinaga saw the full extent of Manuel Carrasco's power when the city government fell under his influence.

Ojinaga was in deplorable condition. It had doubled in size in less than ten years to twenty thousand people, swelled by economic refugees from rural Chihuahua and from the interior of Mexico. Basic municipal services such as electricity, sewage, and running water, not to mention paved streets, had not kept pace with the growth. When it rained, the streets were churned into mud pits; the rest of the time they were as dusty as the Sahara. Ramshackle squatter neighborhoods were springing up in the southeast part of town. Starvation was evident in some of the outlying villages, while malnutrition was becoming an alarming health problem even in town. Tax money was not accounted for, at least not to the people.

Corrupt government, spawned by the control of Mexico's political system by a single party since 1929, was getting the blame. It was a political system that grew out of a revolution to overthrow dictatorship, but it in turn became what Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa termed "the perfect dictatorship" due to its ability to give itself the appearance of democratic legitimacy by allowing opposition groups to compete for power. But in fact its control over the electoral process was so absolute that opponents were rarely able to win.

It was election time and campaigns were gearing up for the mayoral race. The official party candidate had already been announced. Even though it knew it was butting its head against an immovable object, the chief opposition party extended an open invitation to the citizens of Ojinaga to select a candidate. The National Action Party, the PAN as it was called in Mexico, was one of a half-dozen opposition parties appearing on the ballots in those days, most of them to the left. With its center-right, Catholic-inspired philosophy and similarities to European Christian democracy, it was the only opposition group that the ruling party viewed as posing a danger to its control in northern Mexico.

Party adherents taught that Mexico's problems stemmed from a lack of political alternatives, a lack of control by the governed over the political system, which resulted in pervasive corruption. Authentic

democracy could eventually be achieved if enlightened citizens, working together in organized opposition and peaceful action, persisted until breaking the official monopoly on power.

The slate of nominees for the National Action candidate for mayor consisted of a journalist, two merchants and a rancher. The convention took place on a warm Sunday afternoon in February at a popular dance hall on the east slope of downtown Ojinaga. Peasants in cotton shirts and sweat-soaked straw hats rubbed shoulders with merchants in tan guayaberas and expensive Resistol hats. Mechanics with grease still under their fingernails sat next to the manicured wives of attorneys.

A fiery speech by one of the opposition party leaders, Antonio Vazquez, an attorney, was typical of the political oratory of the day:

“People of Ojinaga,” he began. “Once again a group of free men and women has come together with the goal of achieving an orderly participation in the political life of our community. We cannot take distance from the great and serious problems that we see all around us in our economic, social, family and work life. For years, we have been submerged in a political, social and economic existence that has been plagued with vices and irregularities. It is a secret to no one that the purpose for which the Revolution was fought, for fair elections, has been violated across the land.

“We all know how we are manipulated. We know that workers, to get jobs or to keep them, must belong to government unions. And we all know that the peasants, to keep the land the government has allowed them to work, must belong to the official union. And we all know what that means when elections come along. They will vote to keep their jobs and keep their land.

“Another of our most pressing concerns is the corruption we see every day among government officials. We see them working their little rackets together. And since we are on the subject, why not add as well that they have formed an alliance with organized crime. And this with the idea of obtaining riches and privileges, leading to a twisted idea of what politics should be all about.

“Fellow citizens, those who are running Mexico today have forgotten that only power that seeks the common good is legitimate power. Political activity has as its goal to satisfy the needs of the people and not to satisfy the shameless and seemingly limitless greed of the official party.”

The speeches continued for several hours. Finally came a show of hands. The winner on the first round was a twentyseven-year-old merchant originally from a village on the Rio Conchos, south of Ojinaga. Ernesto Poblano was not the most eloquent of the candidates, but he was by far the best known. He had been an accountant in a customs brokerage firm before opening a hardware store and had sponsored baseball teams in and around Ojinaga. He had become the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

With his selection began the most intensive opposition-party campaign Ojinaga had ever seen. Mexican elections then were usually accompanied by charges of ballot-box stuffing, doctored tally sheets, multiple voting by government supporters, deletion of the names of opponents from voter registration lists, the theft of ballot boxes and numerous other vote-rigging techniques. This election was no different, but of the 6,500 ballots counted, Poblano still won by 150 votes. Even more surprising, the government recognized the victory—the only one of sixtyseven municipal elections conceded to an opposition party that year in Chihuahua, and one of the few municipal elections ever conceded up to that time in Mexico.

But the jubilation soon faded. Even before the new administration took over, rumors spread that Poblano had been laundering money for Manuel Carrasco. Rumors further alleged that Poblano had obtained the money to buy his hardware store from Manuel Carrasco. Poblano was also accused of having gone secretly to the official party to seek the nomination for mayor, but turned to the opposition party only after being told the position was going to a longstanding party loyalist.

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