

GANGS, “COUPS D’ STREETS,” AND THE NEW WAR IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Max Manwaring
Strategic Studies Institute

A new kind of war is being waged in Central America – and elsewhere around the world – today. The main protagonists are what have come to be called first, second, and third generation street gangs. In this war, gangs are not sending conventional military units across national borders, or supporting proxy forces in an attempt to conquer territory or bring down governments. Rather, these nonstate actors are more interested in commercial profit and controlling territory (turf) to allow maximum freedom of movement and action. That freedom of movement within countries and across national borders ensures commercial market share and revenues, as well as secure bases for market expansion. Thus, in addition to drug smuggling, these gangs are known to have expanded their activities to smuggling people, body parts, weapons, and cars; associated murder, kidnapping, and robbery; home and community invasion; and other lucrative societal destabilization activities. What makes all this into a new kind of war is that these commercial motives are known to have been developed into political agendas by more sophisticated gangs.

Street gangs from California began moving into Central America in the early 1990s. The main impetus came as a result of convicted felons being sent from prisons in the United States back to the countries of their parents’ origins. These gangs include the famed *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and several others operating in the United States, Mexico, South America, Canada, and Europe. In the first, second, and third generation stages of their development, virtually all the Central American gangs have flourished under the protection and mercenary income provided by gang-narco alliances that are credited with the transshipment of up to 75 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States. And, in this connection, third generation gangs have developed into more seasoned organizations with broad markets and very sophisticated alliances with transnational criminal organizations. This more highly developed nexus must inevitably take control of ungoverned territory within a nation-state, and begin to acquire political power in poorly-governed space.

Rather than trying to take down a government in a major stroke (*golpe, or coup*) as insurgents do, gangs take control of turf one street or neighborhood at a time (“*coup d’ street*”). As a result, crime rates have increased dramatically throughout Central America to the point where the Honduran annual murder rate, at 154 per 100,000 population, is reported by the Honduran press as the highest in the world and double that of Colombia – which is engaged in an insurgency war. Additionally, 3,500 people, including more than 455 young women, were murdered in Guatemala in 2004. A majority of those murders took place in public, in broad daylight, and many of the mutilated bodies were left as grisly reminders of a gang’s prowess. As a result of these and other types of violence and intimidation, second and third generation gangs and

their mercenary allies are controlling larger and larger portions of cities, the interior, and the traditionally inviolate national borders—and have achieved almost complete freedom of movement and action within and between national territories.

Central American governments and their U.S. neighbor have tended to ignore these national security realities. The United States is involved elsewhere, and in the War on Terrorism. Central American governments tend to be too weak and too compromised to act effectively against the gang phenomenon. Most of these governments have not been prepared to even try to mobilize their various instruments of national and regional power to confront the threat to people and territory the gang phenomenon represents. As a consequence, the effective sovereignty of the Central American countries is being impinged every day, and the gangs' commercial motives are, in fact, becoming a political agenda.

This challenge to the state takes us to the direct linkage between gangs and insurgents. Although gangs and insurgents may differ in terms of motives and modes of operation, both these types of nonstate actors must eventually seize political power to guarantee the freedom of action and the ideological or commercial environments they want. The common denominator that defines gangs as mutations of insurgents, thus, is the irrevocable need to depose or control an incumbent government. As a consequence, the "Duck Analogy" applies. That is, third generation gangs look like ducks, walk like ducks, and act like ducks—a peculiar breed, but ducks nevertheless!

Thus, despite a certain mystique, gangs are not invincible. They can be brought under control and defeated, but only by coherent, patient action that encompasses *all* the instruments of a state's power and those of its international allies. In these terms, it must be remembered that gangs and their control of borders, territory, and people are transnational problems as well as national problems—and transnational problems require transnational solutions. Police and soldiers cannot deal with these threats alone; they must be eliminated using a combination of political-psychological, socio-economic, law enforcement, military, intelligence, and diplomatic capabilities. The complex realities of contemporary wars must be understood as holistic processes that rely on various civilian, military, and police agencies and contingents working together in an integrated fashion, to attack the gangs' strategy—not just the gang.

These efforts will require fundamental changes in leader development and governmental organization. That is, these efforts will require fundamental changes in how governmental leaders and personnel at all levels and across the board are trained, developed, promoted, deployed, and employed—and organized. Additionally, these interagency and international processes must exert their collective influence for the entire duration of a "countergang" campaign—from initial planning to the achievement of effective control. Long "laundry lists" of additional recommendations will be irrelevant if these strategic-level foundational requirements are not implemented first.

The contemporary war situation in Central America is extremely volatile and dangerous, and requires careful attention. The United States, the other countries of the Western Hemisphere, and the entire global community must learn to understand and cope with the political threat imposed by diverse street gangs. If the United States and

the rest of the international community concentrate their attention, efforts, and resources elsewhere and continue to ignore the gang phenomenon and “coups d’ streets” in Central America, the resultant instability could easily destroy the democracy, free market economies, and limited prosperity that have been achieved in recent years. In turn, that would profoundly affect the health of the global economy—and concomitant U.S. power to act in the global security arena.