



Amexica: War Along the Borderline

Ed Vulliamy

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Amexica is the harrowing story of the extraordinary terror unfolding along the U.S.-Mexico border—"a country in its own right, which belongs to both the United States and Mexico, yet neither"—as the narco-war escalates to a fever pitch there.

In 2009, after reporting from the border for many years, Ed Vulliamy traveled the frontier from the Pacific coast to the Gulf of Mexico, from Tijuana to Matamoros, a journey through a kaleidoscopic landscape of corruption and all-out civil war, but also of beauty and joy and resilience. He describes in revelatory detail how the narco gangs work; the smuggling of people, weapons, and drugs back and forth across the border; middle-class flight from Mexico and an American celebrity culture that is feeding the violence; the interrelated economies of drugs and the maquiladora factories; the ruthless, systematic murder of young women in Ciudad Juarez. Heroes, villains, and victims—the brave and rogue police, priests, women, and journalists fighting the violence; the gangs and their freelance killers; the dead and the devastated—all come to life in this singular book.

Amexica takes us far beyond today's headlines. It is a street-level portrait, by turns horrific and sublime, of a place and people in a time of war as much as of the war itself.

Amexica: War Along the Borderline Details

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From Reader Review Amexica: War Along the Borderline for online ebook

Matthew Griffiths says

this is a fascinating account of a journey through one of modern histories most unusual conflict zones, the US-Mexican border during the conflicts between states and drug cartels. right from the start this book does a great deal to dispel the supposed glamour of organised crime and show just how much damage these groups have wrought all along the borderline. another very interesting element to this book is the argument that is central to much of the story of the cartels whilst criminal mirroring legitimate business in its post modern capitalist phase. this definitely makes for a fascinating read on organised crime

Margo says

An unfortunate title for an amazing tour of the multitudinous factors involved in the current border crisis. Framed historically, developed specifically for understanding the status of the border in 2010.

Introduction - Defining the unique nature of the borderland and the rise of violence associated with narcotrafficking.

1. La Plaza - A survey of the system of narco and the history of the players—both individuals and the various cartels. Growing official recognition of the extent of corruption and control of society by narcos.

2. Aqui Empieza La Patria - A portrait of Tijuana, the transition from club town to site of grotesque violence, and the failure of prosecution and law enforcement. The separation of families as the border closed. An introduction to La Santa Muerte, and the revision of her appearance and identity when she was co-opted by narcos.

3. El Camino Del Diablo - An exploration of the death of migrants along the border, especially the events covered by Urrea in “The Devil’s Highway.” The process of crossing, and how the arrival of cartels in the human trafficking industry has changed the process/terrain of migration. The laws regulating Mexican labor in the US through history.

Intermission: The Business End of a 12-Gauge - A portrait of two old-school border patrolmen, contrasted with current methods and the changing threats to border enforcement.

4. Urban Frankenstein - A portrait of Juarez, contrasted with El Paso. The battle for culture, identity, survival, amidst maquilas and the extreme violence among competing cartels, police forces, and the military. The escalation of violence following increased military presence in Juarez. The rise in attacks on rehab facilities, and a new order of violence, fear, addiction on the streets of Juarez.

5. The Human Junkyard - The human wreckage of Juarez: a portrait of an asylum for brain-damaged and recovering drug addicts, and the insane. Led by a recovered addict and a priest.

6. The Wind of Knives - The daughters of Juarez, murdered in astonishing numbers, with impunity. Official

dismissal of and disinterest in the victims, the likely complicity of the police. The failure of any system of law or justice.

Intermission: The Road it Gives, and the Road it Takes Away - The north side of the border, the silent bleed-over of corruption, and the influence of narco business on the youth of the U.S. side.

7. Eat off the Floor - Maquilas, the endemic abuse of workers, the limited rights gained by unions in certain locales. Corporations simply withdraw if workers become troublesome, and struggles for decency and fairness generally backfire or get nowhere.

8. Gateway to the Americas/Pax Mafiosa - 40% of all trade between Mexico and the U.S. crosses at Laredo / Nuevo Laredo, by truck or by train. The current phase of narco violence began in Nuevo Laredo when Sinaloa challenged the Gulf cartel for control of the smuggling corridor; Los Zetas prevailed, resulting in a Pax Mafiosa. Nuevo Laredo is not the warzone that Juarez is, but the citizenry suffer under constant fear, silence, and double taxes.

9. Iron River/Tell Them Who You Are - Gunrunning south from the US to supply the drug war: straw buyers, the beginnings of recognition of 'co-responsibility' in Washington, and the resistance of US citizenry (especially Texas) to any increase in gun regulation. The struggle for identity, culture, art, a semblance of a normal life in the midst of chaos along the border. The double-outsider status of Mexican Americans.

Epilogue: El Sol Negro – One frustrated medical examiner's view of current events as the end of days—a final phase of a culture that has lost its way, declined into a pursuit of luxury and power, and lost all values.

Ann says

Read this if you have any interest at all in Mexico, the Southwest, immigration and drug policy, or just want to be a better-informed citizen and human. It is compassionate, infuriating, engrossing, informative, and altogether readable. I cannot recommend it highly enough for people who want to know more than their Fox-watching, hate-spewing kith and kin. Vulliamy is obviously at a loss for clear-cut solutions and bromides, but he brings the populations and challenges on both sides of the border to life beautifully.

Nils says

A well-informed piece of travelogue/reportage of the literally torturous history of the US – Mexico border in the era of the War on Drugs. It captures well the way in which the simple stories of opposition between nefarious drug lords and virtuous Mexican government is blatant misrepresentation. On the contrary, there has long been a series of not very cozy condominiums between various drug cartels and both local and national factions of the Mexican government. The most important aspect of the book is its unflinching examination of the symbolic and instrumental use of violence on the part of various factions in Mexico, most obviously including the various kaleidoscope of mutating cartels, but also encompassing the Mexican government's own response. For those who have not followed events in Mexico closely, the images will undoubtedly be shocking.

As Vulliamy makes clear, the brutalization of the war on drugs is in fact a perverse reflex of the democratization of Mexican politics: so long as the PRI monopolized political power (from 1917 until about 2000) drug dealers knew who they had to pay off and territories were clearly defined, which minimized the violent contestation of the plazas (the staging areas for the transshipment of drugs into the US). With the break up of the PRI's political monopoly, it has become unclear who should be bribed or who has the authority to dictate territorial arrangements. Likewise, the increasing professionalization and fairness of the Mexican judiciary has, ironically, made it much harder to secure convictions for drug-related crimes, including murder — which has increased the impunity with which crimes are committed.

Vulliamy also pays attention to the way in which US stances on drugs (and related deviant activities) have created the conditions for the brutalization in Mexico. Not only is the US's insatiable demand for drugs to primary driver of the drug economy, but so is the US effort to crack down on domestic production of drugs. Likewise, Vuillamy emphasizes the role of the "iron river" of guns flowing from the United States into Mexico in the growing violence in Mexico. Nor does he shy away from the important role of racism in defining not only the US goals in the conflict but also the daily behavior of both policymakers and front-line agents. Moreover, he wisely notes that just as the fragmentation of political authority in Mexico is a precondition for the violence in that country, so is the fragmentation and competitiveness of different US antidrug bureaucracies a key factor in the ineffective US government response to the challenges of drug trade.

Vulliamy's narrative focus stays mostly on the front lines of the conflict: the drug dealers, the border agents, the innocent (and not-so-innocent) bystanders. He is less interested in the underlying economics of the narcotics industry. For example, he pays little attention to the central role of money laundering in the war on drugs (other than noting the DEA's disinterest in "following the money" — which is not exactly accurate), nor about the role of the US prison-industrial complex, nor about the bureaucratic incentives in favor of hardening and militarizing the campaign. The result is a fascinating narrative with vivid characters that alas remains somewhat analytically incomplete. In the end, he does not ask the most fundamental question: why does this hopeless war continue decade after decade? Perhaps because of his unrelenting focus on violence, Vulliamy largely affirms the metaphor of war to describe the regulation of the transnational drug economy.

Angela says

This was my "beach" read for our Thanksgiving vacation to Florida. I was so thoroughly engrossed I barely remember any details from our holiday. This fascinating, angering and heartbreakng report is very well researched and written, and the author/reporter so well versed and caring so much about the subject matter that I began an instant obsession with the region as well as its (our) vexing issues.

Ed Vulliamy is wise to trace the root of the problem beyond America's drug addiction and subsequent arms smuggling. He points to the much larger fault of theoretical globalization and the scars left after corporate flight. Although depressing, sickening and rage-inducing he leaves us with hope from non-profit "saintly" groups and individuals.

Emilie says

So far my main goal is to try to get over how many spelling mistakes there are in the Spanish and focus on what Vulliamy is saying. It is difficult given I am still only at the prologue and I've tallied 14 mistakes so far which is frankly embarrassing for Vintage. Hopefully it won't get worse (though clearly it will) and I will be able to get through Amexica without hurtling it across the room unfinished. Here's to hoping...

Ok...so ages later I've finished. My verdict is that this book is little more than poverty porn with a pathetic and ineffective attempt at analysis. I was especially put off by the chapter talking about femicide which did nothing more than enumerate murders without trying to understand the phenomenon. Vulliamy rattles off horrible incidents of death, torture, violence, you name it- and rarely attempts to analyse anything from it. Makes me think somewhat of the crap I produced at university aged 20!

Also, seriously, having lived in Mexico in 2003/4, I feel I know more about the country and the national psyche than he does (erroneously or not), and certainly did not recognise the country or the people I fell in love with (granted I was in Puebla, but I didn't think it was as simple as he put it). All in all, a really average, misguided book. I hope people take it with a pinch of salt because it's badly researched (or really only insofar as it serves its own ends) and is riddled with mistakes.

Dave McCormick says

A point in time review of events along the U.S-Mexico border during some of the worst of the narcotics related violence. From the gruesome open warfare in Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo to the calm but chilling repression in Matamoros (which has seen escalating violence since this was written) Vulliamy sympathizes with the Mexican citizens who have gotten caught up in all the chaos. The book details the rise of the various cartels, the various territorial fights that shift along the border and the enormous flow of drugs heading north and guns and cash heading south. Additionally he goes into detail about the relationship between all the twinned cities on the border, the violence against young women in Ciudad Juarez, the challenges of the maquiladoras and other subjects. Not exactly a fun read but very informative.

Scott says

Picking up Amexica: War Along the Borderline by journalist Ed Vulliamy, I was initially excited, thinking here might be an accessible book by a veteran journalist capable of explaining to the English-speaking public just what is going on in Mexico and why. Naïve, I know. My suspicions were raised as early as the second paragraph when the author mistranslated the extremely common Spanish-language sign-off Atte: as Look out. Atte: is actually an abbreviation of Atentamente, simply meaning Sincerely. Get something that basic that wrong that early in the book, and I knew I was in for a ride - downhill.

In short, Amexica is part travelogue, part sympathetic recounting of the devastation of the militarization of the war on drugs, and part "look at what daring stuff this white guy did." Vulliamy gets some things right - pointing out the fact that the drug trade is just another form of transnational capitalism; examining the U.S. role in arming the cartels and laundering their money; describing the toll neoliberalism has taken on Mexico in terms of migration and maquiladoras; and putting names and faces on some the 35,000+ dead in Felipe Calderón's disastrous so-called fight against organized crime. The main problem is that all of this is carried out superficially and with a lack of historical context and political analysis, along with omissions and errors. As such, if you want to know how things are right now in the borderlands, reading this book might be

somewhat useful. If you want to know why things are they way they are right now, this book will not help you.

In glossing over the past to get to the juicy, bloody present, Vulliamy does his readers a disservice. There is no discussion of how the war on drugs as a concept emerged in the Nixon-era and developed as a strategy of population containment and oppression, a politically expedient and enormously profitable endeavor that since 2001 has coalesced well with the rhetoric of the war on terror and Bush and Obama's war on migrants. The end of 70 years of PRI rule in Mexico on the federal level, dismantling the pre-existing arrangements with the drug cartels just as they were getting more powerful due to the collapse of the Colombian cartels, goes nearly unexamined. Similarly ignored is the role that Calderón's legitimacy played in the launching of a military offensive inside of Mexico. As he fraudulently arrived at the presidency, the drug war was a means of instilling his regime with legitimacy. Scant attention is paid to the Mérida Initiative, the U.S.'s billion dollar military aid package to Mexico, nor to how the same police and military forces receiving the aid and executing the "drug war" are also involved in large scale human rights violations, massive corruption, and the severe repression of Mexico's social movements - all with impunity. Linking these factors to the current events that this book covers is essential for any understanding of the situation.

Adding to the contextual shortcomings of the book are the various errors and poor translations. It's stunning his editors either in the U.K. or U.S. did not hire a translator to verify his Spanish - or at least open a Spanish-English dictionary. Some of the more humorous examples: He translates gabacho as someone from Europe and gringo as someone from the U.S. (Both mean someone from the U.S., Vulliamy would simply be a güero); and translating fresa - in reference to someone who dresses or acts bourgeois - literally as strawberry. Regarding the facts, some examples of errors: The claim that Carlos Salinas privatized communally-held land in the 1980s. (He only arrived at the presidency in December of 1988, privatization did not begin until after the 1992 reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in preparation for NAFTA.) Vulliamy's statement that the Arrellano Félix Organization intentionally killed Cardinal Posadas Ocampo in 1993 in order to target the Catholic Church. (Initial investigations showed they confused Posadas' convoy with that of a rival cartel leader. More recent investigations indicate the assassination was likely state-sponsored.) Or also his writing that "the only investigation of its kind" into Los Zetas penetration into Monterrey was carried out by a Los Angeles Times reporter, ignoring those done by Mexican journalists or Kristin Bricker for Narco News.

In sum, Vulliamy's book leaves much to be desired and that which is present should be cautiously digested. Even if it took a bit longer to put out, a more thoroughly-considered and better edited version of this book would have made a much more useful contribution to this politically-manufactured crisis facing Mexico and increasingly the U.S.

Anna says

Ksi??ka o zmianach w rozrachunkach gangów i mafii przemycaj?cych narkotyki z Meksyku do Stanów Zjednoczonych i o brutalnej wojnie mi?dzy wielkimi kartelami.

J. says

Fantastic book (mostly) about the drug war raging on the U.S.-México border. All aspects are covered,

including the army's and policy fight against and (often) complicit involvement with the narcos, the war's effect on immigration, the recent involvement of Native border tribes in the issue, the complicity of the maquiladoras in providing the grounds for recruitment, the complicity of the U.S. in regards to easy availability of weapons, the lack of interest in "following the money", etc. The book treats the whole border and all the major narco factions, from the East coast & California, all the way to the Gulf of México & Texas. The format consists of interviews by the author of a sample of people affected by each of these issues. Most of all, it shows the brutality of the drug cartels, and thereby the brutality with which the army has resorted to fighting them.

The main thesis of the book---which I think true, but not quite as defended as it should be---is that the drug war represents a foretaste to a post-political, globalized, free market economy, where multinational corporations (such like the drug cartels have become) seek profit at any cost, without regard for the consequences to people.

A rather encouraging as well as despairing trend revealed in the book is the involvement of women and The Church in the fight against the drug cartels. Encouraging because, in a society where the police will do nothing (and in fact are often complicit with the drug cartels themselves) to help the people they are meant to protect, where the police (and sometimes the army too) are too scared to fight these criminals---and with good reason!---, people of good will, the majority of which are women (displaying that special genius of which John Paul II spoke, and which was in full view at the Crucifixion of Jesus when all his Apostles scattered, but the women remained), and The Church are practically the only ones opposing the drug cartels: speaking out against them, organizing public protests, trying to shame these bastards into acting humanely; that is, they are practically the only ones exemplifying the dignity of the human person even in situations where such a concept appears to be folly and fairy-tale-like. And yet the trend is despairing as well: for anyone who speaks against the cartel, be it priests, police, women, politicians, reporters, army generals---anyone!---ends up dead (usually in some grotesque way), and very often cruelly tortured and raped before being killed. Despair is, indeed quite close by: evil has won; good is destroyed. It takes soooooo much faith to believe that the example of human dignity displayed by these people far outweighs (spiritually) the evil being perpetrated, and that therefore good will be triumphant in this world one day. But "one day" seems so very far away when your children are being killed.

Overall, I would recommend it to all the clueless Americans who do not see the connection between their drug habit and the terrible harm they are causing. As was put in the book: anytime someone inhales drugs, they are inhaling human lives. But I do not suppose those kind of people read books.

Natasha says

Fantastic read and a really important book - everybody should read it and be aware of the atrocities happening everyday in Mexico.

Love the very poignant closing line by Munoz the Tijuana pathologist: "I live like a man who sits eating a delicious taco on the street there, aware that every moment could be his last. One bullet, and he is dead."

Tomasz says

Ten poka?ny reporta? zdoby? Nagrod? im. Ryszarda Kapu?ci?skiego. Absolutnie zas?u?enie. Vulliamy pokaza? ?ycie na granicy meksyka?sko-ameryka?skiej i trudno rzec, czy dobrze, ?e to zrobi?. ?two tutaj utraci? wiar? w pa?two, instytucje w?adzy, policj? etc. Obraz wojen narkotykowych, kt?re pustosz? Meksyk budzi nie mniejsze przera?enie ni? realistyczne reporta?e z afga?skich p?b? bitewnych. Kartele u?brojone w bro? automatyczny? i granatniki, meksyka?skie jednostki specjalne przechodz?ce na stron? handlarzy prochami, krwawe bitwy uliczne, przera?aj?ce cho? beznami?tne opisy okrucie?stw, kt?rych dopuszczaj? si? sicarios kartelu Sinaloa, Juarez, Los Zetas czy El Golfo... Do tego powszechny handel broni?, ameryka?skie banki pior?ce miliardy (sic!) dolarów, maquiladoras - fabryki ameryka?skich korporacji na meksyka?skich pograniczu. Posr?d tego ludzie. Ci, kt?rzy si? boj? i ci, kt?rzy podejmuj? walk?. Cz?sto beznadziejne, zazwyczaj zako?czon? wizyt? siepaczy kartelu. Ca?o?? napisana ?wietnym, dynamicznym i niepozbawionym poetycko?ci j?zykiem.

Wspania?a ksi??ka!

Jim says

A literally shocking non-fiction account of the drugs war raging on the Mexican American border, and the breakdown of society that this is in turn promoting. The book starts in a fairly dry way, but soon becomes a gripping dialogue for the dead as the atrocities and breakdown of society are catalogued through accounts from not only the people trying to address the problems, but also from the bereaved, the addicted, the detritus of this burnt out society that still functions despite itself. Soon enough it reads like the worst excesses of a James Ellroy or Don Winslow crime/horror novel, all the more gripping because you know it's true despite the fact that you have to strain to believe it. Are the drug barons, the police, the army and the judiciary caught up in some sort of demonic campaign to kill women for kicks? The book infers that this is the case. Are the worst of the junkies, alcoholics and mentally ill patients interred in charitable hostels being systematically massacred by death squads in some sort of attempt at social cleansing? Quite possibly, the book states, and takes you to the places that these massacres occurred, the author literally walking through the pools of congealed blood as he traces the killers' undisguised bootprints on their killing trail through one of these erstwhile sanctuaries. It is shocking stuff.

As the book progresses, it becomes more concerned with socio-economic issues such as the exploitation of cheap labour in Mexico by global (American) corporations, which is probably a book in itself. But it's the drug wars that glue both sides of the border together, with the drugs going north and the guns running south. What to do about it though?

Part travelogue, part history, part social study and almost always a bit of a horror story, Amexica is an eye-opener, but don't be surprised if you want to close them just as quickly. Maybe they should just legalise the lot of it and see where it takes us. For white, middle class America, this situation would be utterly unthinkable and intolerable, as intolerable as the lives of the Mexicans living on the borderline already is.

Nat says

I couldn't get into this one at all. There were some interesting tidbits of information, but the book never really gets down to brass tacks. I wanted to educate myself on the Mexican drug war, but with this book I suppose I should have been expecting more of a travelogue than a lesson. It did have some chilling and

informative stuff, but Vulliamy's writing put me to sleep more than once. I never felt the presence of any of the people he was meeting or the places he was describing. All in all, I can't recommend this book, but maybe it could be good for someone who already knows the basic details of the drug war and wants to get some more personal stories of civilians in the area.

Lukasz Malitowski says

Author did a tremendous work to describe every aspect of this violent and unbelievably cruel war. The numbers of victims are terrifying and we don't know when this conflict will finally end. For most of the people who live among the cartels it's a dead end, they have no choice left, they need to cooperate with drug traffickers. Sad thing is that there is no hope for them, corruption and bribery is on every level, from police, military, administration to politicians. But we can't blame only Mexicans, guilty are also the Americans as clients .
