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# The Drug Lord Who Got Away

Mexican Capo Unleashes Mayhem on U.S. Border; The Making of a Legend

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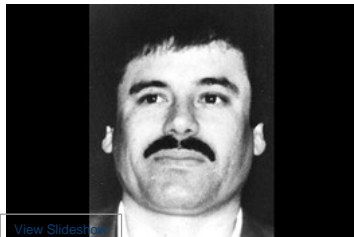
By DAVID LUHNOW and JOSE DE CORDOBA

BADIRAGUATO, Mexico -- As a child, Joaquín Guzmán Loera was so poor that he sold oranges to scrape together money for a meal. Since then, the 52-year-old has built a business empire and a personal fortune currently tied for number 701 on Forbes magazine's list of global titans.

He also has another ranking: Mexico's most wanted man.

Mr. Guzmán is the informal CEO of one of the world's biggest drug-trafficking organizations, the so-called Sinaloa cartel, named for its home state of Sinaloa. It smuggles a big part of the marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines that end up on American streets, and it has links to organized crime in 23 countries, according to Mexican and U.S. officials.

## Mexico's Most-Wanted Man



Procuraduría General de la Republica/Associated Press  
Joaquín Guzman Loera, alias "El Chapo," in a photo released in May 1993

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Mr. Guzmán's rivalries and turf wars have contributed to a drug-war death toll that stands at 11,000 in the past two and a half years, an average of 366 murders per month. His feuds stretch back more than two decades, leaving a trail of tombstones that act as milestones of the narcotics business south of the border.

Part Al Capone and part Jesse James, Mr. Guzmán has become a narco folk hero. He is feted on YouTube videos and by musicians who pen ballads, known as *corridos*, in his honor. He is known throughout Mexico simply as "El Chapo," Mexican slang for a short and stocky man.

Adding to his mystique, "El Chapo" has survived several assassination attempts by rival gangs, including a 1993 attack that killed a Roman Catholic cardinal. He also pulled off the greatest escape in modern Mexico: from a maximum security prison in 2001 -- in a laundry cart. Ever since, he has stayed a step ahead of Mexican and U.S. officials in a game of cat and mouse that is now in its ninth year.

Each year that Mexico is unable to catch "El Chapo" his legend grows -- a direct challenge to the authority of the Mexican state. Last year, he flouted authorities by hosting a party, complete with cases of whiskey and a *norteño* band, in a remote Mexican village to watch his 18-year-old girlfriend, Emma Coronel, win a local beauty contest. Months later, he married her.

With each year, too, questions grow about why Mexico, together with help from the U.S., can't find him -- despite a \$5 million bounty offered by Washington (tips can be sent to [chapotips@usdoj.gov](mailto:chapotips@usdoj.gov)) and a \$2 million reward from the Mexican government.

U.S. and Mexican officials say Mr. Guzmán has used money and cruelty to build a well-disciplined organization that protects him. He is believed to be hiding in the towering Sierra Madre mountains that run through Sinaloa and bordering states, making the task of finding him a bit like finding Osama bin Laden in the forbidding mountains of Pakistan. Another factor: Mr. Guzmán is believed to have bribed enough Mexican law-enforcement and army officials to get timely tip-offs that allow him to avoid capture.

On at least three occasions during the past three years, Mexican security agencies have gotten leads on Mr. Guzmán, only to find he had

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Culiacan, Sinaloa is the unofficial capital of Mexico's drug-trafficking business. Given the shortened lifespan for drug traffickers, shrines and mausoleums honoring fallen narcos have become an integral part of the city's landscape. David Luhnow and Jose de Cordoba reports from Mexico.

Over the past few years, Mr. Guzmán has regularly visited a ranch in the remote mountains of Chihuahua state to check on his marijuana crop, according to a 2008 Mexican intelligence document reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. The ranch, owned by Mr. Guzmán's associates, has an airstrip and an

underground tunnel for access. "On at least three visits, he has arrived with a caravan of at least six vehicles, under the protection of some authorities in the Mexican army," the document says. Mexico's Defense Ministry said in an email that it was unaware of the allegations, but added that "various criminal organizations have used army clothing and vehicles as a cover for their activities."

In April, the archbishop in Durango, a state known for its scorpions, outlaws and rugged wilderness, declared that Mr. Guzmán was living there. "Just up the road from [the town of] Guanaceví, that's where he lives, but, well, we all seem to know this except for the authorities," Archbishop Héctor Gonzalez Martinez told local reporters.

### 'He Leads a Gang of Mafioso Gunmen'

Read the lyrics of songs in written in honor of "El Chapo."

### Leaving His Mark

[Tracking Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán Loera Across Mexico](#)

Four days later, the bullet-riddled bodies of two army lieutenants turned up near Guanaceví in the trunk of a car, blindfolded and with their hands tied behind their backs. Next to the dead men was a note that read: "Neither the government nor the priests can handle 'El Chapo.'"

Purported sightings of Mr. Guzmán are common. In at least three Mexican cities, including Culiacán, Sinaloa's capital, people have reported seeing the capo turn up to eat at a local restaurant. They say he was preceded by bodyguards who confiscated diners' cell phones and didn't allow anyone to leave. As repayment for the patrons' brief loss of liberty, Mr. Guzmán was said to have paid everyone's tab.

An owner of one of the restaurants denies any such thing happened. But a Mexican intelligence report says that at least one of the restaurant stories is believed to be true.

Mexican officials say they don't want to get obsessed with capturing Mr. Guzmán at the expense of winning the broader war on drugs. "In the past, the strategy was just to capture top guys and ignore the operational guys. Now we are trying to weaken the structure of the cartels," says Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora.

This week alone, Mexican troops arrested José Parra, a leading gunman for the Sinaloa cartel who police say was helping Mr. Guzmán's outfit wage war against the Tijuana cartel, a fight that claimed 749 lives last year. And in Durango, soldiers said they killed three of Mr. Guzman's gunmen, including the alleged head of his organization in that city, and captured two others.

A U.S. official agrees that the capture of Mr. Guzmán himself would do little to slow the illegal drug market, but said it would be a major coup. "Catching him would be like the capture of Saddam Hussein after the Iraq war," says the U.S. official. "His capture didn't stop the insurgency, but it was a huge victory."

Some U.S. officials believe Mexico will catch Mr. Guzmán soon. They say his status as Mexico's most wanted man forces him to be constantly on the move, making it harder to conduct day-to-day business. They say he has aged rapidly in appearance, and draw parallels to the late Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar, who was finally killed after years on the lam.

"Chapo Guzmán is a dead man walking, and he knows it," says Michael Braun, who retired eight months ago as the head of operations for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "No one in his business lives to old age, or to enjoy his grandchildren."

But Mr. Guzmán has been underestimated before. In 2005, then Mexican Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca said Mr. Guzmán was "no longer operating" in the drug business. In early 2007, the current attorney general, Mr. Medina Mora, wrote off Mr. Guzmán as a has-been in the drug business.

"I don't care where he is," he told The

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From left, Mr. Guzmán's brother Arturo "The Chicken" Guzmán was murdered in prison by a rival drug cartel; longtime associate Héctor "El Guero" Palma was captured in 1995 and sent to prison in the U.S.; Ignacio "Nacho" Coronel is now considered Mr. Guzmán's top associate in the cartel.

(Photos, left to right: Reuters, Associated Press, Zuma Press)

A separate feud between Mr. Guzmán and a former associate, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, led to a killing spree in Sinaloa that claimed more than 600 lives. Among the victims of the feud: Mr. Guzmán's 22-year-old son, Édgar, killed in a mall parking lot outside a Bridgestone tire-repair center in Culiacán.

Today, experts say Mr. Guzmán's group is battling other cartels in states as diverse as Chihuahua, Durango, Baja California, Guerrero, Sonora, Michoacan, and Quintana Roo.

**Rivals**

From left, brothers Benjamin, Francisco and Ramón Arellano Félix feuded over territory with Mr. Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel for nearly two decades. They initially went to war to wrest control of the Mexicali border from Mr. Guzmán and Hector Palma.

(Photos: Associated Press)

Separating fact from fiction is difficult. Asking Mexican officials about El Chapo usually draws blank stares. "I don't know much about him," says Juan Millán, a former Sinaloa state governor. A local reporter who covers the drug trade for *Noroeste*, a leading Sinaloa newspaper, says he stays away from writing too much about the kingpin. "It isn't worth dying for."

According to the few people who have met him and are willing to talk publicly about it, Mr. Guzmán comes across as down-to-earth and intelligent, despite a third-grade education.

"He's a simple guy, a rancher type, who talks with a country accent, but he's very smart," says José Antonio Ortega, a lawyer who took Mr. Guzmán's deposition in prison shortly before he escaped in 2001. Scheduled to meet Mr. Guzmán at 10 a.m., Mr. Ortega says he was kept waiting at the prison until 10 p.m. He met the capo in a well-appointed prison cell that Mr. Guzmán used as his personal anteroom.

Wall Street Journal in an interview. "He's like a washed-up soccer star."

**A Central Figure**

Since then, Mr. Guzmán has left little doubt he's a central figure in the drug war. Experts say it was his gang's push into northern Chihuahua state to try to wrest control of lucrative smuggling routes from rival gangs that has turned the place into a war zone. Some 3,300 people have been killed in the past 15 months, according to press reports. A

In Culiacán, urban legends about El Chapo are daily bread. One says that a thief unwittingly robbed the capo's niece's car, and got his hands cut off by Mr. Guzmán's thugs as a lesson. In another, a former top state official reportedly fell for a local beauty and sent her an expensive gift. The gift was returned to his office along with a note from Mr. Guzmán saying the girl was his. "Send her another gift and I'll kill you," the note said.

Mr. Guzmán apologized for the 12-hour delay, telling the lawyer that he had had a conjugal visit that day, and had then taken a nap and a shower in order to be ready to "receive [you] with all the courtesy you deserve to be received with," Mr. Ortega recalls.

**Mexico's 'Golden Triangle'**

One of four brothers, Mr. Guzmán was born in a Sinaloa mountain hamlet of some 40 houses known as La Tuna. La Tuna sits in Badiraguato County, which has the dubious distinction of being the birthplace of most of Mexico's famous drug lords. Badiraguato's location has a lot to do with it: It's the gateway to Mexico's "golden triangle," a remote, mountainous intersection of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua states where opium and marijuana have been grown for generations.

Little is known about Mr. Guzmán's early years. But it is believed that like many of his

neighbors, Mr. Guzmán's late father was a *gomero*, a person who grew poppies for opium and heroin. The family was so poor that when Mr. Guzmán was a baby, his mother turned an old

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wooden crate used to pack tomatoes into a cradle for him, says a local official who has seen a Guzmán family photograph.

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"When he talked about his childhood, he became suspended, as if it were something he wanted to forget," Zulema Hernández, a former policewoman who met Mr. Guzmán while she was serving a stint in prison for robbery, said in an interview with Mexican journalist Julio Scherer for his book on the country's prison system.

Ms. Hernández said Mr. Guzmán was driven by a fear of returning to poverty. "We both shared this dread of having to be poor," she told the journalist. Ms. Hernández went into the drug business herself after her release in 2004, Mexican police say, and was found dead in the trunk of an abandoned car in Mexico City last year. Police don't believe her death was linked to Mr. Guzmán.

Badiraguato, one of Mexico's 200 poorest counties, offers its young few jobs other than the drug trade. In the small town of Santiago de los Caballeros, near the birthplace of legendary drug lords Rafael Caro Quintero and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, local peasants, or *campesinos*, haul freshly cut marijuana on their backs. The smell of marijuana wafts through the air.

The mountain folk of Badiraguato are widely seen as macho, close-mouthed people of tight-knit clans, given to intense loyalty, bloody vendettas and honor killings. "The Omerta of Badiraguato is much deeper than that of Sicily," says Luis Astorga, an expert on the drug trade at Mexico's UNAM University who was born and raised in Sinaloa.

Here, up-and-coming drug lords pick out girls as young as 13, returning to claim them -- usually with the girl and her families' consent -- when they reach 16 or 17. "It's not seen as a negative when a narco comes calling. He can offer a way of life," says a local official.

Many of the fathers and grandfathers of these young capos are buried by the side of Badiraguato's dusty roads or on hillsides with views of the crumbling adobe homes where they were born. They lie in grand marble mausoleums built like mock colonial cathedrals or Greek temples, far more elaborate than the humble houses below.

Judging by photographs or paintings of the dead displayed on the tombs, Badiraguato's native narcos often die young. "Better to live like a *rey* [king] for six years than as a *güey* [ox, or fool] for sixty," is a common saying here.

Trying to catch Mr. Guzmán in a place like Badiraguato is a tall order. The county covers 2,300 square miles -- half the size of Connecticut -- with more than 450 tiny towns sprinkled throughout inaccessible mountains. Badiraguato has just 38 cops and five police cars, all stationed in the county seat, leaving every other town with no police at all, just gunmen from the cartels.

Mr. Guzmán's hometown sits a five-hour drive from the county seat down a bumpy dirt road. From June to September, rains make the road nearly impassable. The town itself hasn't changed much, say local officials, except for a bunker-like compound Mr. Guzmán built for his mother and a small church he built for his mother's evangelical Christian group.

Wall Street Journal reporters tried to visit the town along with a local official, who wanted to show off the county's economic development efforts such as building eco-friendly log cabins for tourists. But after two days' delay, the official said a trip was too dangerous. "I was told a visit would be seen as inconvenient," he said. "[Chapo] is not eager for publicity."

### *Working as an Enforcer*

As a young man in Badiraguato in the 1980s, Mr. Guzmán rose through the ranks to become a top lieutenant for Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, another Badiraguato native and former cop who had become Mexico's top drug lord, according to analysts and former police officials. Known as *El Padrino*, or the Godfather, Mr. Félix Gallardo cobbled together a super-cartel dominated by fellow Sinaloans called "The Federation."

But the relative unity imposed by Mr. Félix Gallardo collapsed after his arrest in 1989. His empire, in particular the border crossings that were useful smuggling points, was divided up among his lieutenants. Mr. Guzmán and his close friend Héctor "*El Güero*" Palma got the border crossing at Mexicali, about 70 miles from Tijuana.

Mr. Guzmán began building an empire of his own. He pioneered the use of underground tunnels across the U.S.-Mexico border to ferry drugs. One such tunnel near San Diego had electricity, air vents and rails to transport the drugs, according to the DEA.

Mr. Guzmán operated an assembly line packing cocaine into chili pepper cans under the brand Comadre, exporting the drugs to the U.S. by rail, his former top accountant, Miguel Angel Segoviano, testified in 1996 at the trial of one of Mr. Guzmán's associates. In return for the drugs, Mr. Guzmán imported into Mexico millions of dollars packed into suitcases flown into the Mexico City airport, where bribed federal officials made sure there were no inspections.

A lot of the money "was given to people who worked for the attorney general's office," testified Mr. Segoviano, who became a DEA protected witness in 1993, and was referring to a period in the early 1990s when there was a quick succession of attorneys general.

All the while, Mr. Guzmán fought other traffickers, notably the Arellano Félix clan that controlled the border at Tijuana. Believed to be Mr. Félix Gallardo's nephews, the clan -- including brothers Ramón, Benjamin and Francisco -- initially went to war to drive Mr. Guzmán and Mr. Palma from the Mexicali border. The feud unleashed almost two decades of unremitting violence.

In one of the earliest incidents, Rafael Clavel, a Venezuelan believed to be working for the Arellano clan, seduced Mr. Palma's wife, Guadalupe Leija, according to former Mexican police officials. They say he took her to San Francisco, where she gave him access to some \$7 million of Mr. Palma's money. Mr. Clavel cut off her head, and sent it to Mr. Palma's house in Culiacán in a cooler. Soon after, Mr. Clavel threw Mr. Palma's two small children off a bridge in Venezuela.

Arrested and charged for that crime in Venezuela, Mr. Clavel was murdered in prison. Ms. Leija and her two children are buried in a tomb in Culiacán, adorned with a fresco of the trio. Captured in 1995, Mr. Palma was later extradited to the U.S. and sits in prison for drug trafficking and conspiracy.

The beheading of Ms. Leija was Mexico's first linked to the drug trade. Twenty years later, decapitation has become common practice as the country's warring cartels try to outdo each other in barbarity.

"The killing of El Guero Palma's wife and children shattered the unwritten rules of drug trafficking," says Gregorio Ortega Molina, a Mexico City-based writer who has written a novel about Mexico's first generation of drug capos.

Messrs. Palma and Guzmán sought revenge. In 1992, gunmen for the two men kidnapped and killed nine people, including lawyers and nephews of Mr. Félix Gallardo, the imprisoned drug lord, according to Mexican police reports reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

### *Seeking Revenge*

The Mexican attorney general's office created a special unit to investigate the executions. But the unit was taken off the case after investigators said they discovered Mr. Guzmán had paid \$10 million to the country's top police officials, including the then head of the federal police and the top anti-drug official, according to police reports and interviews with former police officials.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office said it had no comment about allegations of corruption in past administrations.

In early November 1992, Ramón Arellano and four gunmen riddled Mr. Guzmán's car with their AK-47s as he was driving down a main avenue in Guadalajara, then the hub of Mexico's drug trafficking industry.



Associated Press

José Alfonso Sánchez and Miguel Ángel Piedra Gallardo, were arrested this week in Durango.

Days later, El Chapo struck back. A commando team of about 40 gunmen posing as policemen attacked Christine's, a nightclub frequented by American tourists in the resort town of Puerto Vallarta. Five people died in the shootout, but Ramón and Javier Arellano, both in the bathroom when the gunfire started, escaped unharmed.

Six months later, Arellano gunmen killed seven people in a spectacular shootout in the parking lot of Guadalajara's airport where Mr. Guzmán had gone to catch a plane. Among

the dead were two of Mr. Guzmán's bodyguards and five bystanders, including Juan Jesús Posadas -- the city's cardinal and one of Mexico's two top prelates.

Mr. Guzmán escaped by crawling and rolling out of the airport parking lot, eventually grabbing a taxi, he later told police. He took refuge in Mexico City, bought false passports and set out with a girlfriend and a business associate for Guatemala while "the problem at the Guadalajara airport was resolved."

The Cardinal's killing shocked Mexico, and forced the Mexican government to make a show of cracking down on drug traffickers. Just 16 days later, Mr. Guzmán was captured by Guatemalan soldiers and handed over to Mexico.

Interviewed by police after his arrest, Mr. Guzmán denied being involved in drug trafficking. He said that "all of my life I've been dedicated to agriculture." He said he was a farmer and businessman, buying and selling corn, sugar, canned goods, and seeds, and dabbling in cock fighting. His income, he said, was about "20,000 new pesos [\$5,700] a month without any

extras." A gun lover, he told police he favored the Russian-made AK-47 automatic rifle.

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### *A Good Life in Prison*

Mr. Guzmán was sentenced to 20 years for conspiracy, bribery, and drug trafficking. He was sent to Puente Grande prison, a maximum security facility, where he continued to run his empire. At the prison, he bribed nearly everyone, including the warden, who is now in jail himself for letting the escape occur under his watch.

Mr. Guzmán's money bought him privilege, according to police officials who investigated his escape. His cell had a television, and he sometimes chose his meals from a menu rather than be served with the rest of the inmates. He had a cellphone to continue directing his drug business, and met often with members of his organization. Other regular visitors were his wife, several lovers and prostitutes. He was given Viagra.

One of his lovers was Ms. Hernández, the policewoman in jail for robbery. After the pair became romantically involved for the first time, Mr. Guzmán sent her a bottle of whiskey and flowers, followed by dozens of love letters, dictated by Mr. Guzmán and written by someone else.

"Zulema, I adore you... [To think] that two people who didn't know each other could meet in a place like this," says one of the letters, as quoted in a book by journalist Mr. Scherer. All were signed with the initials JGL, for Joaquin Guzmán Loera.

El Chapo, together with his longtime associate Mr. Palma, terrorized the jail. Female members of the prison staff, ranging from nurses to cooks, were paid to have sex with the drug lords. One woman who refused was raped, according to documents from the Jalisco state human rights agency viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Prison guards, too, were offered money to cooperate with the capo. Those who refused were beaten with baseball bats by a group run by Mr. Guzmán known as "the batters," according to the documents, which include first-hand accounts from people working in the prison.

In January 2000, a prison guard named Felipe Leaños filed a complaint with the Jalisco state human rights commission about the abuses at the jail. In the following months, he persuaded four other guards to step forward. The state agency, run by a lawyer named Guadalupe Morfin, tried to get federal officials to intervene in the jail during the course of the year. Mr. Leaños disappeared in May 2007 and is presumed to have been murdered by Mr. Guzmán's men. Ms. Morfin received death threats and had a government-assigned security detail until last year.

Mexico's official story of Mr. Guzmán's escape goes like this: He befriended a prison maintenance worker named Javier Camberos. Mr. Guzmán then told the guards who were on his payroll that Mr. Camberos was going to be smuggling some gold out of the prison in a laundry cart, and to not search the cart. But on the night of Jan. 19, 2001, Mr. Guzmán hid in the cart as Mr. Camberos wheeled him out of the prison. Mr. Camberos is now in prison for helping the escape.

Many Mexicans believe prison officials essentially let Mr. Guzmán walk out. It is difficult to know what really happened, partly because the prison's camera surveillance tapes of that night were erased by prison officials. Jorge Tello, one of Mexico's top security officials at the time, visited the prison on the day of the escape, after having heard rumors the capo might flee. Despite the visit, Mr. Guzmán still managed to escape.

Mr. Tello, who didn't respond to requests for comment, is now President Felipe Calderon's top adviser in the war on drugs.

—Evan Perez and John Lyons contributed to this article.

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