



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 27, 2014

Cartel-Style Billboards, Hanged Mannequins Shock El Paso Citizens

On May 22, morning commuters in El Paso, Texas, were unnerved to see two mannequins hanging by nooses, one on each of two roadside billboards accompanied by graffiti-style threats often made by Mexican drug cartels. The words “PLATO O PLOMO” (“silver or lead”) were written in white paint on one of the billboards. The phrase is widely taken to mean “Accept a bribe or be killed by a bullet.”



The other billboard — which bore a wanted poster from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) offering a reward of \$5 million for the capture of drug lord Rafael Caro Quintero — had the more obtuse phrase “Dying for Drugs” written on it. The mannequin hanging from the first billboard was dressed in a suit, and the other billboard’s mannequin was in jeans.

Sgt. Chris Mears, a spokesman for the El Paso Police Department, said in a statement quoted by the *El Paso Times*: “This symbol [“Plata o Plomo”] has historically been used by Mexican drug cartels to threaten or intimidate Mexican citizens, business owners and government officials. However, we have never experienced this in El Paso.”

Mears continued: “The investigation is ongoing, but we do not have any information to suggest this was done to target any individual person or business at this time.”

The *Times* also quoted Phil Jordan, who is both the former director of the El Paso Intelligence Center and a former DEA agent, who said he received calls from El Paso residents about the billboards.

“Whoever did this went through a lot of work to get this accomplished,” said Jordan. “This is possibly a message to someone who hasn’t cooperated with the cartels. But, even if it’s a hoax, something like this is going to make the El Paso population uneasy, given that the city is not far from the killing fields of Mexico.”

Spokesmen for the companies that own the two billboards, Lamar Advertising and Clear Channel Outdoor, respectively, stressed that the graffiti and figures were not paid advertising, but the work of vandals. The offending messages were taken down by mid-day.

“Maybe the problems in Juarez are coming over here,” El Paso resident Javier Padilla told station KHOU in Houston, which is 748 miles driving distance from El Paso.

The disturbing messages allude to a more threatening practice among drug cartels operating south of the border — they hang real bodies from highway overpasses as warnings against those who inform on them or otherwise fail to cooperate. Until now, however, such threats on the U.S. side of the border have been unknown.

The phrase written on the one billboard has become so ingrained in the drug culture of Latin American that it appeared in the title of a research paper published by the *American Political Science Review* for February 2006: “‘Plata o Plomo?’: Bribe and Punishment in a Theory of Political Influence.” The article’s



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authors, Ernesto Dal Bó of the University of California Berkeley, Pedro Dal Bó of Brown University, and Rafael di Tella of Harvard Business School, described their paper:

We present a model where groups attempt to influence policies using both bribes (plata, Spanish for silver) and the threat of punishment (plomo, Spanish for lead). We then use it to make predictions about the quality of a country's public officials and to understand the role of institutions granting politicians with immunity from legal prosecution. The use of punishment lowers the returns from public office and reduces the incentives of high-ability citizens to enter public life.

The authors continued:

During their first week in office, Colombian judges and other public officials involved in the antidrug war often receive a message asking: "Plata o plomo?" The message originates from the drug cartels and is Spanish for "Silver or lead?" It reminds public officials that there is an alternative to fighting drugs and receiving plomo (Spanish for lead, as in bullets) which is to not fight drugs and receive plata (Spanish for silver or money, as in a bribe).

The authors go on to use complex mathematical formulas to illustrate a relationship between bribery and threats of violence emanating from various drug cartels and how these forces impact the economics of drug trafficking and the political careers of officials in areas where the drug cartels exert influence.

While it remains to be determined if the El Paso billboards were vandalized by the Mexican drug cartels or by mere copycats, the city's proximity to the Mexican state of Chihuahua presents a constant threat of drug violence spilling over the border.

Ciudad Juarez (or simply, "Juarez") sits right across the border from El Paso. Though it was once a popular day-trip destination for Texans, it has now become one of the world's deadliest cities. An October 21, 2010 *El Paso Times* article reported that more than 6,700 people had been killed in Juarez in the previous two years, 2,470 of them in 2010. The deaths resulted from gun battles, executions, car-jackings, and other violent activities.

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott has observed that it is safer to walk the streets of Baghdad than those of Juarez.

Drug smugglers from Juarez have often used tunnels under the border to bring their contraband into El Paso. An article in the *El Paso Times* on June 26, 2010 reported that U.S. Border Patrol agents had discovered "a tunnel used by drug traffickers that stretched 130 feet under the concrete-lined Rio Grande from Mexico into the U.S."

The discovery of that drug tunnel and the constant threat of Mexican drug cartels moving operations to the U.S. side of the border naturally has made El Paso residents aware of the threat from the cartels. So it is understandable that the billboards festooned with non-cooperative victims of the drug cartel hung in effigy has had the effect, as former DEA agent Phil Jordan said, of making "the El Paso population uneasy."

Photo of El Paso skyline at night

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