



# DEA MEXICO CHIEF QUIETLY OUSTED OVER TIES TO DRUG LAWYERS - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on January 28, 2023 by JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN | ASSOCIATED

PRESS



The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration quietly ousted its former top official in Mexico last year over improper contact with lawyers for narco-traffickers, an embarrassing end to a brief tenure marked by deteriorating cooperation between the countries and a record flow of cocaine, heroin and fentanyl across the border.

Nicholas Palmeri's socializing and vacationing with Miami drug lawyers, detailed in confidential records viewed by The Associated Press, brought his ultimate downfall following just a 14-month stint as DEA's powerful regional director supervising dozens of agents across Mexico, Central America and Canada.

But separate internal probes raised other red flags, including complaints of lax handling of the coronavirus pandemic that resulted in two sickened agents having to be airlifted out of the country. And another disclosed this past week found Palmeri approved use of drug-fighting funds for inappropriate purposes and sought to be reimbursed to pay for his own birthday party.

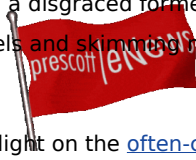
"The post of regional director in Mexico is the most important one in DEA's foreign operations, and when something like this happens, it's disruptive," said Mike Vigil, the DEA's former chief of international operations.

"It's even more critical because of the deteriorating situation with Mexico," added Phil Jordan, a former director of the DEA's El Paso Intelligence Center. "If we don't have a strong regional director or agent in charge there, it works against the agency's overall operations because everything transits through Mexico, whether it's coming from Colombia or the fentanyl that flows in through China. It cannot be taken lightly."

*This March 2020 photo provided by the U.S. Border Patrol shows drugs seized from a tunnel under the Otay Mesa area of San Diego, Calif. Federal authorities seized a panoply of narcotics inside the newly discovered underground passage connecting a warehouse in Tijuana, Mexico, with south San Diego.*

Palmeri's case adds to a [growing litany of misconduct](#) roiling the nation's premier narcotics law enforcement agency at a time when its sprawling foreign operations — spanning 69 countries — are under scrutiny from an external review ordered by DEA Administrator Anne Milgram.

That review came in response to the case of Jose Irizarry, a disgraced former agent now serving a 12-year federal prison sentence after confessing to laundering money for Colombian drug cartels and skimming millions from seizures to fund an international joyride of jet-setting, parties and prostitutes.



Palmeri's is the second case in recent months to shine a light on the [often-cozy interactions](#) between DEA officials and Miami attorneys representing some of Latin America's biggest narcotraffickers and money launderers. Last year, federal prosecutors charged a DEA agent and a former supervisor with leaking confidential law enforcement information to two unnamed Miami defense attorneys in exchange for \$70,000 in cash.

One of those attorneys, identified by current and former U.S. officials as David Macey, was also implicated in the probe into Palmeri. Internal investigative records show Macey hosted Palmeri and his Mexican-born wife for two days at his home in the Florida Keys — a trip that investigators said served no useful work purpose and violated rules governing interactions with attorneys that are designed to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

Palmeri, 52, acknowledged to investigators that he stayed at Macey's getaway home, that his wife worked as a translator for another prominent attorney, Ruben Oliva, and that he took an unauthorized trip to Miami with his wife in February 2021.

The purported purpose of the Miami trip had been to "debrief" a confidential source. But it took place at a private home where Palmeri showed up with his wife — and a bottle of wine, according to the internal report.

"The meeting had the appearance of a social interaction with a confidential source," the investigators wrote, "and there was no contemporaneous official DEA documentation concerning the substance of the debrief, both of which violate DEA policy."

Those violations prompted Palmeri's abrupt transfer to Washington headquarters in May 2021 before he ultimately stepped down last March, the records show. Palmeri told investigators he had shown "not the best judgment."

The DEA wouldn't discuss the specifics of Palmeri's ouster or why he was allowed to retire instead of being fired. But an official told the AP the agency "has zero tolerance for improper contacts between defense attorneys and DEA employees."

"The DEA aggressively investigates this serious misconduct and takes decisive action, including removal, against employees who engage in it," said the official, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly and asked not to be named.

*Drug Enforcement Administration Administrator Anne Milgram, speaks during a news at the Department of Justice in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File)*

For his part, Palmeri described the misconduct investigations as a "witch hunt" prompted by personal and professional jealousies he refused to specify and "an ill-conceived narrative to remove me from my position."

Palmeri added that his relationships with attorneys have "always been professional and ethical," and that all his expenditures in Mexico were "judicious" and benefited the U.S. government.

"It is ironic," Palmeri wrote in an email, "that the Department of 'Justice' would commit this injustice to the country."

Macey did not respond to requests for comment. Oliva told AP the the translation work Palmeri's wife did for him was "totally unrelated" to Palmeri and that he's "never met a more ethical, hard-working and highly effective drug enforcement agent."

A former New York City police officer, Palmeri raised eyebrows from the moment he arrived in Mexico in 2020.

Some agents complained about his near-obsession with capturing Rafael Caro Quintero, the infamous drug lord behind the killing of a U.S.

DEA agent in 1985, saying Palmeri prioritized that over the agency's less-flashy efforts to stem the flow of Chinese precursor chemicals used to make fentanyl. [Quintero was finally taken into custody](#) last summer, months after the DEA recalled Palmeri to Washington.

Chris Landau, who oversaw Palmeri as U.S. ambassador to Mexico during the Trump administration, said that singular focus on Quintero and other such headline-grabbing arrests is characteristic of the DEA's broader failings in the drug war.

Landau cited the shocking U.S. arrest in 2020 of a former defense secretary, Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, which prompted Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to disband the elite police unit that was the DEA's key ally. López Obrador also rammed through a national security law keeping DEA agents at their desk instead of out in the field. Overnight, law enforcement cooperation between the neighboring countries went from strained and spotty to non-existent.

"Unfortunately, in the absence of a broader strategy, DEA is driving the bus of U.S. counter-narcotics policy and it's a very narrow lane they drive in," Landau said. "It's not going to move the needle in terms of stemming the flow of drugs into the U.S. and frequently carry sometime devastating foreign policy consequences."

*This undated photo provided on Jan. 24, 2020 by U.S. Customs and Border Protection shows some of over 165 pounds (75 kilograms) of suspected methamphetamine seized after smugglers tried to float it across the border from Nogales, Mexico, by roping together dozens of packages and sending them through an underground drainage tunnel into Arizona, according to federal officials.*

Palmeri also came under criticism for his handling of coronavirus procedures in 2020, when federal agents were under orders to avoid in-person meetings and unnecessary travel. Several agents under Palmeri's command, including an assistant regional director, contracted COVID-19 following a meeting at the DEA office in the resort town of Mazatlán, where some agents say they were admonished or ridiculed for wearing masks.

Two agents became so ill they had to be airlifted out of the country, according to two former U.S. officials who weren't authorized to discuss the controversy and spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity.

An Office of Inspector General report released this past week also found Palmeri sought government reimbursement to pay for his own birthday party and approved the purchase of "unallowable items" as part of foreign trips by the then acting DEA administrator. Tim Shea, who held that position during Palmeri's tenure, did not respond to requests for comment.

The report, which did not detail specific items or amounts spent, also did not explain its conclusion: "Criminal prosecution of the Regional Director was declined."

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Mustian reported from New York.