



Future Conflict: Criminal Insurgencies, Gangs and Intelligence

John P. Sullivan

Gangs dominate the intersection between crime and war. Traditionally viewed as criminal enterprises of varying degrees of sophistication and reach, some gangs have evolved into potentially more dangerous and destabilizing actors. In many areas across the world—especially in ‘criminal enclaves’ or ‘lawless zones’ where civil governance, traditional security structures, and community or social bonds have eroded—gangs thrive. This essayⁱ briefly examines the dynamics of crime and war in these contested regions. Specifically, it provides a framework for understanding ‘criminal insurgencies’ where acute and endemic crime and gang violence challenge the solvency of state political control.

Criminal gangs come in many forms. They challenge the rule of law and employ violence to dominate local communities. In some cases they are expanding their reach and morphing into a new warring entities capable of challenging the legitimacy and even the solvency of nation-states. This potential brings life to the prediction made by Martin van Creveld who noted, “In the future, war will not be waged by armies but by groups whom today we call terrorists, guerrillas, bandits and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit upon more formal titles to describe themselves.”ⁱⁱ

Some advanced gangs—known as ‘third generation gangs’ and/or *maras*—are waging ‘wars’ and changing the dynamics of crime. In some extreme cases they are waging a *de facto* criminal insurgency. As Adam Elkus and I recently noted: “Criminal insurgency is haunting the police stations and barracks of North America. Powerful criminal networks increasingly challenge the state’s monopoly on force, creating new threats to national security.”ⁱⁱⁱ Mexico is currently challenged by extreme criminal violence,^{iv} but it is by no means the only state in the Americas suffering from criminal insurgency. Transnational criminal organizations ranging from the transnational street collective *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) to the powerful Mexican drug cartels are steadily increasing in both power and reach. Even some American street gangs are evolving into ‘third generation’ gangs: large, networked, transnational bodies that may yet develop true political consciousness.^v

Criminal insurgency presents a challenge to national security analysts used to creating simulations and analytical models for terrorism and conventional military operations. Criminal insurgency is different from “regular” terrorism and insurgency because the criminal insurgents’ sole political motive is to gain autonomy economic control over territory. They do so by hollowing out the state and creating criminal enclaves to maneuver.^{vi}

Global Gangs/Transnational Crime

These criminal gangs and their impact is no longer a localized criminal issue. Transnational gangs and crime have hemispheric and global potentials. Gangs are essentially a form of organized crime and in an age of globalization, transnational or global crime can change the nature of war and politics.

These potentials find their underpinnings in the virulence of transnational crime. Transnational crime has effectively become a threat to political, economic, environmental and social systems worldwide. This threat involves more than drug trafficking. In addition to the substantial illegal global drug trade and its attendant violence, transnational crime also embraces major fraud, corruption and manipulation of both political and financial systems. Canadian intelligence analyst Samuel Porteous describes this, explaining that transnational crime undermines civil society, political systems and state sovereignty by normalizing violence and legitimizing corruption. It also erodes society by distorting market mechanisms through the disruption of equitable commercial transactions, and degrades the environment by sidelining environmental regulation and safeguards. All these potentials have the cumulative effect of destabilizing nations and economies.^{vii}

Transnational gangs and criminals extend their reach and influence by co-opting individuals and organizations through bribery, coercion and intimidation to "facilitate, enhance, or protect"^{viii} their activities. As a consequence, these groups are emerging as a serious impediment to democratic governance and a free market economy. This danger is particularly evident in Mexico, Colombia, Nigeria, Russia and other parts of the Former Soviet Union where corruption has become particularly insidious and pervasive. At sub-national levels, such corruption can also have profound effects. At a neighborhood level, political and operational corruption can diminish public safety, placing residents at risk to endemic violence and inter-gang conflict, essentially resulting in a "failed community." This is the virtual analog of a "failed state."^{ix}

Examining Cartel Evolution

Drug cartels are one type of organized criminal enterprise that have challenged states and created "lawless zones" or criminal enclaves. Examining cartel evolution can help illuminate the challenges to states and civil governance posed by criminal gangs and cartels. Robert J. Bunker and I looked at cartel evolution and related destabilizing potentials in our 1998 paper "Cartel Evolution: Potentials and Consequences."^x In that paper, we identified three potential evolutionary phases. These are described below.

1st Phase Cartel (Aggressive Competitor)

The first phase cartel form originated in Colombia during the 1980s and arose as an outcome of increasing US cocaine demand. This type of cartel, characterized by the Medellín model, realized economies of scale not known to the individual cocaine entrepreneurs of the mid-1970s. This early cartel was an aggressive competitor to the Westphalian state because of its propensity for extreme violence and willingness to directly challenge the authority of the state.

2nd Phase Cartel (Subtle Co-Opted)

The second phase cartel form also originally developed in Colombia, but in this instance, is centered in the city of Cali. Unlike their Medellín counterparts, the Cali cartel was shadowy organization devoid of an actual kingpin. Its organization is more distributed and network-like, rather than hierarchical. Many of its characteristics and activities were stealth-masked and dispersed, which yielded many operational capabilities not possessed by the first phase cartel form. Specifically, it possessed leadership clusters that are more difficult to identify and target with a decapitation attack. The Cali cartel was also more sophisticated in its criminal pursuits and far more likely to rely upon corruption, rather than violence or overt political gambits, to achieve its organizational ends. This cartel form has also spread to Mexico with the rise of the Mexican Federation, an alliance of the “big four” mafias based in Tijuana, Sonora, Juárez, and the Gulf. This dynamic is still evolving.

3rd Phase Cartel (Criminal State Successor)

Third Phase Cartels, if and when they emerge, have the potential to pose a significant challenge to the modern nation-state and its institutions. A Third Phase Cartel is a consequence of unremitting corruption and co-option of state institutions. While this "criminal state successor" has yet to emerge, warning signs of its eventual arrival are present in many states worldwide. Of current importance in the United States are the conditions favoring narco- or criminal-state evolution in Mexico. Indeed, the criminal insurgency in Mexico could prove to be the genesis of a true third phase cartel, as Mexican cartels battle among themselves and the state for dominance. Essentially, third phase cartels rule criminal enclaves, acting much like warlords.

Criminal Enclaves

The fullest development of a criminal enclave exists in the South American jungle at the intersection of three nations. Ciudad del Este, Paraguay is the center of this criminal near free state. Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina converge at this riverfront outpost. A jungle hub for the world's outlaws, a global village of outlaws, the triple border zone serves as a free enclave for significant criminal activity, including people who are dedicated to supporting and sustaining acts of terrorism. Denizens of the enclave include Lebanese gangsters and terrorists, drug smugglers, Nigerian gangsters and Asian mafias: Japanese Yakuza, Tai Chen (Cantonese mafia), Fuk Ching, the Big Circle Boys, and the Flying Dragons. This polyglot mix of thugs demonstrates the potential of criminal netwarriors to exploit the globalization of organized crime.^{xi}

The blurring of borders—a symbol of the post-modern, information age—is clearly demonstrated here, where the mafias exploit interconnected economies. With the ability to overwhelm governments weakened by corruption and jurisdictional obstacles, the mafias of Ciudad del Este and its Brazilian twin city of Foz do Iguacu demonstrate remarkable power and reach. Terrorism interlocks with organized crime in the enclave, a post-modern free city that is a haven to Middle Eastern terrorists, a hub for the global drug trade, a center consumer product piracy, and base for

gunrunners diverting small arms (from the US) to the violent and heavily armed drug gangs in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The convergence of cartel evolution and manifestation of inter-netted criminal enterprises is so pronounced in this enclave, Robert Bunker and I call this the third phase cartel the Ciudad del Este model.^{xii} The transnational criminal organizations here demonstrate the potential for criminal networks to challenge state sovereignty and gain local dominance. These networked "enclaves" or a third phase cartel embracing similar characteristics could become a dominant actor within a network of transnational criminal organizations, and potentially gain legitimacy or at least political influence within the network of state actors. Mexico's current battle for the 'plazas' may be an early manifestation of criminal enclave formation.

Transnational Gangs

Transnational gangs are another state challenger. They are a concern throughout the Western Hemisphere. Criminal street gangs have evolved to pose significant security and public safety threats in individual neighborhoods, metropolitan areas, nations, and across borders. Such gangs—widely known as *maras*—are no longer just street gangs. They have morphed across three generations through interactions with other gangs and transnational organized crime organizations (*e.g.*, narcotics cartels/drug trafficking organizations) into complex networked threats.^{xiii}

Transnational *maras* have evolved into a transnational security concern throughout North and Central America. As a result of globalization, the influence of information and communications technology, and travel/migration patterns, gangs formerly confined to local neighborhoods have spread their reach across neighborhoods, cities and countries. In some cases, this reach is increasingly cross-border and transnational. Current transnational gang activity is a concern in several Central American States and Mexico (where they inter-operate with cartels).^{xiv}

Transnational gangs can be defined as having one or more of the following characteristics: 1) criminally active and operational in more than one country; 2) criminal operations committed by gangsters in one country are planned, directed, and controlled by leadership in another country; 3) they are mobile and adapt to new areas of operations; and 4) their activities are sophisticated and transcend borders.^{xv} The gangs most frequently mentioned in this context are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and Eighteenth Street (M-18), both originating in the *barrios* of Los Angeles. In order to understand the potential reach and consequences of transnational *maras* it is useful to review third generation gang theory.

Street Gangs: Three Generations on the Road to Netwar

A close analysis of urban and transnational street gangs shows that some of these criminal enterprises have evolved through three generations—transitioning from traditional turf gangs, to market-oriented drug gangs, to a new generation that mixes political and mercenary elements.

The organizational framework for understanding contemporary gang evolution was first explored in a series of papers starting with the 1997 article “Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels,

and Netwarriors.”^{xvi} These concepts were expanded in another article with the same title, and the model further refined in the 2000 *Small Wars and Insurgencies* paper “Urban Gangs Evolving as Criminal Netwar Actors.”^{xvii} In these papers (and others), I observed that gangs could progress through three generations.

As gangs negotiate this generational shift, their voyage is influenced by three factors: *politicization*, *internationalization*, and *sophistication*. This gang form the ‘third generation’ gang entails many of the organizational and operational attributes found with net-based triads, cartels and terrorist entities. The characteristics of all three generations of gangs are summarized in Table 2.

The three generations of gangs can be described as follows:

- **Turf: First Generation Gangs** are traditional street gangs with a turf orientation. Operating at the lower end of extreme societal violence, they have loose leadership and focus their attention on turf protection and gang loyalty within their immediate environs (often a few blocks or a neighborhood). When they engage in criminal enterprise, it is largely opportunistic and local in scope. These turf gangs are limited in political scope and sophistication.
- **Market: Second Generation Gangs** are engaged in business. They are entrepreneurial and drug-centered. They protect their markets and use violence to control their competition. They have a broader, market-focused, sometimes overtly political agenda and operate in a broader spatial or geographic area. Their operations sometimes involve multi-state and even international areas. Their tendency for centralized leadership and sophisticated operations for market protection places them in the center of the range of politicization, internationalization and sophistication.
- **Mercenary/Political: Third Generation Gangs** have evolved political aims. They operate—or seek to operate—at the global end of the spectrum, using their sophistication to garner power, aid financial acquisition and engage in mercenary-type activities. To date, most third generation (3 GEN) gangs have been primarily mercenary in orientation; yet, in some cases they have sought to further their own political and social objectives.

A more detailed discussion of these three generations follows.

First Generation Gangs

Traditional street gangs are almost exclusively turf-oriented. They operate at the lower threshold of extreme societal violence, possess loose leadership and concentrate their attention on turf protection and gang loyalty within their immediate environs (often a few blocks, a cell-block, or a neighborhood). When they engage in criminal activity, it is largely opportunistic and individual in scope. Turf gangs are limited in political scope, and are unsophisticated in tactics, means, and outlook. When they engage in rivalry with competing gangs, it is localized. Despite their limited spatial influence, these gangs due to their informal network-like attributes can be viewed as proto-netwarriors. Local criminal organizations can evolve into armed bands of non-

state soldiers should they gain in sophistication within failed communities with disintegrating social structure. While most gangs will stay firmly in the first generation, a few (e.g., some ‘Crip’ and ‘Blood’ sets and some Hispanic gangs) span both the first and second (nascent organized crime groups with a drug focus).

Second Generation Gangs

Second generation gangs are essentially criminal businesses. They are entrepreneurial in outlook and generally drug-centered. They use violence to protect their markets and limit or control their competition. They seek a broader, market-focused, occasionally overt political agenda and often operate in a broader spatial or geographic area. Their operations sometimes involve multi-state, cross-border, or international reach. They tend to embrace centralized leadership and conduct sophisticated operations for market protection. As such, they occupy the center of the range of politicization, internationalization and sophistication. Second generation gangs sometimes use violence as political interference to incapacitate enforcement efforts by police and security organs. Generally, this instrumental violence occurs in failed states, but clearly occurs when gangs dominate community life within ‘failed communities.’ Further evolution of these gangs is a danger when they link with and provide services to transnational criminal organizations or collaborate within narcotics trafficking and distribution networks and other criminal ventures. Because of their attributes, second generation gangs can be considered emerging netwarriors.

Third Generation Gangs

The overwhelming majority of street or prison gangs remain firmly in the first or second generations; however, a small number in the United States, Canada, Central and South America, as well as South Africa have acquired third generation characteristics. Third generation gangs have evolved political aims, operate or seek to operate at the global end of the spectrum, and employ their sophistication to acquire power, money, and engage in mercenary or political activities. To date, these gangs have been primarily mercenary in orientation; yet, in some cases they seek political and social objectives. Examples of third generation gangs can be seen in Chicago, San Diego, Los Angeles, Brazil, South Africa, and throughout Central America.

These gangs have evolved from turf-based entities, to drug-oriented enterprises operating in up to 35 states, to complex organizations controlling entire housing projects, schools and blocks, that conduct overt political activity while actively seeking to infiltrate and co-opt local police and contract security forces. These activities demonstrate the often-subtle interaction of gangs and politics. This shift from simple market protection to power acquisition is characteristic of third generation activity.

Internationalization is the final indicator of gang evolution. Gangs in Los Angeles and San Diego have been notable in this regard, with Los Angeles gangs having outposts in Tijuana, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Belize, and San Diego gangs linking with Baja cartels. The mercenary foray of San Diego’s ‘Calle Treinta’ (‘30th St.’/‘Logan Heights’) gang into the bi-national orbit of the Arellano-Felix (Tijuana) cartel is notable for assassinations, drive-by shootings and other enforcement slayings. Because of their attributes, third generation gangs can

be considered netwarriors. Networked organizational forms are a key factor contributing to the rise of non-state or criminal soldiers.^{xviii}

Impact of Transnational ‘Third Generation’ Gangs (*Maras*)

Like their more sophisticated cartel counterparts, third generation gangs challenge state institutions in several ways. Naval Postgraduate School analyst Bruneau, paraphrased below, describes five (multi) national security threats or challenges associated with transnational *maras*:^{xix}

- They *strain government capacity* by overwhelming police and legal systems through sheer audacity, violence, and numbers.
- They *challenge the legitimacy of the state*, particularly in regions where the culture of democracy is challenged by corruption and reinforced by the inability of political systems to function well enough to provide public goods and services.
- They *act as surrogate or alternate governments*. For example in some regions (*i.e.*, El Salvador and Guatemala) the “governments have all but given up in some areas of the capitals, and the *maras* extract taxes on individuals and businesses.”
- They *dominate the informal economic sector*, establishing small businesses and using violence and coercion to unfairly compete with legitimate businesses while avoiding taxes and co-opting government regulators.
- They *infiltrate police and non-governmental organizations* to further their goals and in doing so demonstrate latent political aims.

These factors can be seen graphically in the battle for control of the drug trade in Mexico.

The Plazas of Conflict

Mexico’s drug wars are fertile ground for seeking an understanding of criminal insurgency. Mexico and the cross-border region that embraces the frontier between Mexico and the United States are embroiled in a series of interlocking criminal insurgencies.^{xx} These criminal insurgencies result from the battles for dominance of the ‘plazas’ or corridors for the lucrative transshipment of drugs into the United States. The cartels battle among themselves, the police and the military, enlisting the support of a variety of local and transnational gangs and criminal enterprises. Corrupt officials fuel the violence, communities are disrupted by constant onslaught of violence, and alternative social structures emerge. Prison gangs—like *Eme*, the Mexican Mafia—also play pivotal roles in the allocation of force and influence. Coping with these threats requires new operational and intelligence approaches.

Red teaming is one tool for understanding these “geosocial” dynamics. Looking at the influences, market imperatives, and factors that drive cartel and gang evolution, as well as the quest for dominance in the *plazas* helps place the violence encountered in criminal insurgency in

context. In this analytical endeavor, red teaming is more than the tactical red cell penetration of vulnerable nodes. It is an adaptive exploration of the criminal enterprises and their interactions within the social and market dynamics of the *plazas*. This can be described as *analytical red teaming*.

Analytical red teaming looks at the network attributes of gangs and cartels in order to determine indicators for future activity. Which gangs or cartels are emerging in a particular area, what factors will extend their reach? Where are their new markets, what is the interaction between a specific gang or cartel? These intelligence questions can be explored through scenarios and analytical wargames. What factors are key market drivers? Where will new markets emerge? What counter-gang approaches will degrade criminal influences in failed communities? How can legitimate community political and social structures be marshaled to limit criminal reach and influence? By applying adaptive, analytical red teaming as an analytical tool, intelligence and law enforcement analysts can explore indicators of gang or cartel evolution, as well as potential courses of action to counter criminal insurgency.

Conclusion

Criminal organizations, particularly drug cartels and transnational gangs are becoming increasingly networked in terms of organization and influence. As these groups evolve, they challenge notions of the state and political organization. States are, at least in the current scheme of things, entities that possess a legitimate monopoly on the use of violence within a specified territory. Third phase cartel, criminal free state or criminal enclaves are factors that challenge that monopoly, much the same as warlords within failed states.

As previously discussed, the current situation in Mexico may shed light on these processes. Mexico is consumed by a set of inter-locking, networked criminal insurgencies. Daily violence, kidnappings, assassinations of police and government officials, beheadings and armed assaults are the result of violent combat between drug cartels, gangs, and the police. The cartels vying for domination of the lucrative drug trade are seeking both market dominance and freedom from government interference. Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and other border towns are racked with violence. Increased deployments of both police and military forces are stymied in the face of corrupt officials who chose to side with the cartels.

The drug mafias have abandoned subtle co-option of the government to embrace active violence to secure safe havens to ply their trade. This *de facto* ‘criminal insurgency’ threatens the stability of the Mexican state. Not satisfied with their feudal outposts in the Mexican interior and along the US-Mexico frontier, the cartels are also starting to migrate north to the United States and Canada and south throughout Central America, and even to the Southern Cone, setting up business in Argentina, and across the South Atlantic to Africa. Money fuels global expansion, and transnational organized crime has learned it can thrive in the face of governmental crisis.

The cartels are joined by a variety of gangs in the quest to dominate the global criminal opportunity space. Third generation gangs—that is, gangs like *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) that have transcended operating on localized turf with a simple market focus to operate across

borders and challenge political structures—are both partners and foot soldiers for the dominant cartels. Gangs and cartels seek profit and are not driven by ideology. But the ungoverned, lawless zones they leave in their wake provide fertile ground for extremists and terrorists to exploit.

Understanding and anticipating these threats is essential to maintaining social control, stability and effective governance. Criminal insurgency requires a new set of skills and organizational capabilities. Intelligence can help craft the understanding needed to build these. The cartel evolution and third generation gang models discussed here are useful analytical frameworks for developing this understanding.

On the operational side, full spectrum policing—that is community policing, investigations, high intensity policing (for gangs and organized crime), public order/riot control, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency—must be developed and deployed. This will require versatile formed units like Israel’s Joint Operations Forces (JOF). These are essentially stability police units (*i.e.*, as gendarmerie/constabulary forces) such as an expeditionary police (EXPOL) or third force options.^{xxi}

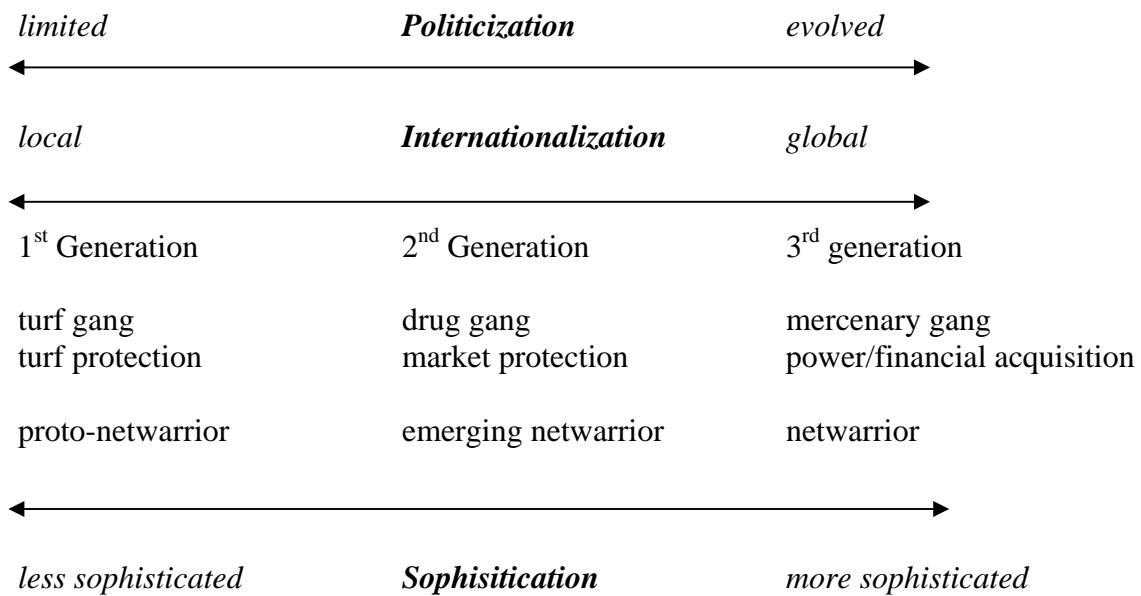
Finally, intelligence and operational art need to be closely integrated. A high degree of co-ordination and co-operation among government agencies and community groups at all levels of governance is needed.^{xxii} This requires both police forces and intelligence services need to co-operate across borders^{xxiii} to gain understanding and achieve the ‘co-production’ of intelligence necessary to counter transnational criminal threats.^{xxiv}

Table 1. Phases of Cartel Evolution

1st Phase Cartel Aggressive Competitor	2nd Phase Cartel Subtle-Co-opter	3rd Phase Cartel Criminal State Successor
Medellín Model	Cali Model	Ciudad del Este/Netwarrior Model
Hierarchical Limited Transnational and Inter-enterprise Links Emerging Internetted Organization	Local (Domestic) Internetted Organization Emerging Transnational and Inter-enterprise Links	Global Internetted Organization Evolved Transnational and Inter-enterprise Links
Indiscriminate Violence	Symbolic Violence Corruption	Discriminate Violence Entrenched Corruption (Legitimized)
Criminal Use and Provision	Transitional (both criminal and mercenary) Use	Mercenary Use and Provision
Conventional Technology Use and Acquisition	Transitional Technology Use and Acquisition	Full Spectrum Technology Use, Acquisition and Targeting
Entrepreneurial Limited Economic Reach	Semi-Institutionalized Widening Economic Reach	Institutionalized Global Economic Reach
Small Scale Public Profiting	Regional Public Profiting	Mass Public Profiting
Limited “Product” Focus	Expanding “Product” Focus	Broad Range of Products/Activities
Criminal Entity Emerging Netwarrior	Transitional Entity Nascent Netwarrior	New Warmaking Entity Evolved Netwarrior

Source: Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Cartel Evolution: Potentials and Consequences,” *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer 1998.

Table 2. Characteristics of Street Gang Generations



Source: John P. Sullivan, "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Net Warriors," *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Autumn 1997

John P. Sullivan is a researcher and practitioner specializing in intelligence, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and urban operations. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST). He also serves as a lieutenant with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, where he is presently assigned as Tactical Planning Lieutenant in the Emergency Operations Bureau.

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