

Suspiciously Unsavory

We were nervous, my wife and I, but for very different reasons. About to cross the American-Mexican border in Laredo, Texas, over the bridge spanning the Rio Grande River to Nuevo Laredo we were imagining endless bureaucratic complications. We needed a visa. We needed an automobile sticker. We needed auto insurance. These are the kinds of things one would normally be nervous about, but not us, not this time.

Just that morning before dawn as we packed in the hotel, the TV news blared three drug related executions of city officials within shouting distance of the Nuevo Laredo city hall. Juarez, Tijuana, Nogales all reported regular drug assassinations the announcer said with a very serious face. Kidnappings, extortions are not uncommon, he told us, brow appropriately wrinkled. Drug cartels are rampant. Unsavory characters of every descriptions were abundant. Of course I believed these things. All of them. We were about to enter a country with people of nefarious motives.

I began looking furtively back and forth to see if any unsavory characters were lurking about. It was 5:00 AM. There was no one on the bridge, unsavory or not.

My wife was nervous too, though not about potential banditos, assassins and thugs, the people I was looking for. She was terrified of any government official at all being in close proximity to me and we were going to be around a lot of them for the next few hours.

When I look in the mirror I see a plain, very ordinary American male face. Nothing dangerous there. No beady eyes. Perfectly normal. Even pleasant. But she probably had a right to be concerned. There is a long track record backing up her apprehension.

It all started when we moved to Los Angeles years ago. I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles with my new 1963 Chevrolet Impala, to get my driver's license. As I was getting in my car following the successful passing of the written examination, driver's license in hand, three large policemen, revolvers drawn told me to get out, put my hands on the roof of my car. One enormous, unsavory looking official patted me down, another rifled through my glove compartment and wallet, a third with a big gun trained on me in case I would try to flee warned me of the futility of such action. I was terrified, of course, but after all my records seemed to be in order, the big ugly one

explained there apparently had just a few minutes earlier been a bank robbery nearby perpetrated by a man around 5' 9" tall, brown hair and clothes that could have been like mine, who had escaped in a white 1963 Chevrolet Impala exactly like mine. And, the policeman informed me sternly, I had looked nervous when I left the DMV. He said I appeared to be furtive, suspicious.

Several years later a trip I took from Japan to New York required me to pass through US customs in Hawaii. Nobody gets in trouble in Hawaii I am told. While standing in line, talking to a business colleague, two very unsavory looking officials came up to me, flashed badges and asked me to follow them. Puzzled, I did so. We found ourselves in a smallish room. After one of them patted me down, asked me to hand over my wallet, the other unsmiling man asked me to take off my clothes. In disbelief I declined. Fine, he informed me, there was a jail cell awaiting me until the following Tuesday when a judge could hear my case. "My case?" I asked. "What case?" I was informed that I had looked suspicious standing in line. "We are trained to look for suspect body language," he informed me. "But I was just talking to a friend who was on the plane with me," I said, mystified. "Yes, but you were joking. That is what people do when they have something to hide." So rather than spend a weekend in an unsavory jail, I stripped to my skivvies. The officials didn't apologize. They were still angry because the suspicious guy they picked was clean as a whistle.

Then there was the incident on the train on the way from Paris to Brussels. It slowed, then stopped at the border, many policemen with capes and clubs walking up and down the aisles of the passenger cars, looking left, right, presumably checking passports, and bingo! They stopped right in front of my seat, looked at my wife, looked at me and the next thing I know I'm being patted down outside. Someone who spoke both languages asked the officials why they picked me. "He looks suspicious," one dour, unsavory official with shiny black boots, cape and mustache, informed him. I never found out what my suspected infraction was..

The short hop plane trip in Nepal was probably my fault, I admit. I had just purchased a souvenir...a Gherka knife, a weapon invented for close, hand to hand combat by one of the fiercest fighting people on the face of the earth, a knife about a foot long, sharp as a razor, made in a crescent shape to facilitate cutting through muscle, cartilage and bone, with a beautifully carved bone handle, Somehow, absentmindedly I presume, I stuffed it in my backpack. It took the full range of diplomatic skills of our guide, Hari, a former Gherka warrior and national hero, to convince the ten, grim-faced, unsavory looking

airport guards that I should not be put in a prison for life somewhere in a Himalayan monastery. I asked Hari why they singled me out. He told me the Nepalese word for “suspicious looking,” but I’ve forgotten it.

Back to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. We made it over the bridge without incident but once we parked the car it was clear that there were many unsavory characters hanging about the official visa place, many with big bushy mustaches like Poncho Villa. Everyone in line for their official papers appeared to be a little apprehensive, like the waiting room in the dentist office. Poncho at the visa window took one look at me, scowled, my wife gasped and....he stamped my visa. We got through the whole thing, all officials sullen, glowering, muttering at me, but no patting down, no obscure, loud orders in a foreign language, no interrogations. We got our auto sticker and our six month visa with no incarcerations or threats. As we drove away there was an audible sigh from my wife. Then we came to the first checkpoint 20 miles or so down the road. The unsavory looking official held out his hand to stop, my wife sucking in a considerable amount of air, and he.....let us through, pushing the button for the green light signifying no inspection required.

Unscathed, uninterrogated, unincarcerated, my wife very relieved, but I was pissed.

I had spent hours in the hotel in Laredo making out a very detailed inventory list of things in my car. Everything...EVERYTHING in our van, I was told, having something to do with the passage of electrons through wires needed to have the manufacturer’s name, purpose, serial number and model number clearly delineated. So I spent some considerable time writing down these items: a flashlight, an electric toothbrush, a Toshiba laptop, a hair dryer, a Canon digital camera, a nose hair trimmer...all had to be documented. Then I put them on a spread sheet from my computer. With the help of a dictionary I identified each item in my van in both Spanish and English. This time, I resolved, I would not be caught seeming to have suspicious behavior by some fat, sweaty, unsavory Cro-Magnon official with a prehensile tail.

But now that I had the goods all in order they seemingly didn’t give a damn about my behavior. And it turns out none of my nice neighbors are unsavory at all. They all deliver me a “Buenos Dias” every morning. They don’t seem to find my behavior suspicious either. The workers in our recently purchased house are hard working, skillful and friendly folk. Not an unsavory person anywhere in spite of the Laredo TV warnings to the contrary. I paid my bills without incident. Policemen waved to me in the streets. Even these officials

seemed not to perceive me to be suspicious as far as I could tell. Unsavoryness seemed to be a thing of the past. I began to relax. Even my wife stopped vibrating with anxiety whenever a local official came near me.

That is until I picked up an article in the Miami Herald International Edition. It described a new governmental agency, the Mexican equivalent of the American FBI called the AFI. The Mexican president, Vincente Fox, had established “an elite, honest federal force to fight kidnapers and drug dealers.” The article said there were charges of corruption, AFI agents actually doing the dirty work for the drug traffickers, carrying out kidnappings themselves, the same kinds of vice the agency was created to stop.

President Fox backed his guys just like President Bush backs his. However a report released by the Mexican Office of the Attorney General said 1,493 of the agency’s 7,000 officers had been investigated for possible wrongdoing and 457 had been indicted. That’s 30%. Even President Bush would have to work hard to beat that number. Of course, the Attorney General in Mexico City also defended his team saying, “The instances of corruption are normal for any agency that so intensely fights drug dealing. What we are going to do now is strengthen our mechanisms of supervision.” Good, I thought. Tough guy. Going to police his own agency. Probably the liberal press making outrageously exaggerated claims. Rid the country of unsavory characters.

Then I read the name of this man in charge. First name Daniel. Good biblical name. Last name Cabeza de Vaca. *Cabeza de Vaca*? For God’s sake, the policing of corruption in all of Mexico is being headed, if you will pardon the unavoidable pun, by a guy named “Head of Cow?” The unsavory drug thugs must double over with laughter every time they read about him. “Old Cow Head is going to get us for sure,” they would howl in glee each morning as they pound some poor kidnapped merchant or gringo who looks suspiciously as if he might have some money. Here I am in tranquil, warm Ajijic, Mexico with a Cow Head protecting me?

My neighbors are beginning to look very unsavory again. The cops who used to wave at me now scowl and mutter, I’m doomed, I’m sure, it is just a matter of time.

On the other hand, we had a head of the FBI named after a vacuum cleaner and besides liking to wear women’s undergarments, he did a pretty good job on the mob. Maybe I better wait and see.

