

FOREWORD

There is a cliché about today's news media that says, "If it bleeds, it leads." By that standard, the highly publicized Latino gang Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, has earned its place in the nightly news reports. It has even exceeded that low standard. If we considered only MS-13's gratuitous violence, lack of respect for authority, and utter disregard for human life, it would be hard to distinguish it from many other violent gangs in America. Tom Diaz's account of Latino gangs goes far in understanding why MS-13 is different and was labeled by *Newsweek* magazine in September 2005 as "the most dangerous gang in America." Diaz's work is no esoteric analysis of this transnational gang but, rather, a gritty, real-life look at a menace that most people thought was a big-city issue that did not impact their "safe" bedroom communities. Diaz very effectively traces the origins of this brutish criminal network and the efforts of law enforcement to hold the line against a threat that resides just outside our front doors. As a former law enforcement insider who worked gangs as a street-level FBI agent and, later, as an FBI assistant director ultimately responsible for all FBI gang investigations, I can

attest that the most unsettling aspect of this book is that it is 100 percent accurate. Diaz's research is impeccable, and his insights are spot-on.

During my twenty-five-year tenure in law enforcement, I saw an alarming increase in gangs and gang membership across the country. According to recent surveys, more than twenty thousand gangs are active in the United States, with over 780,000 members. It is important to understand that gangs like MS-13 and 18th Street are different from traditional criminal "syndicates," such as La Cosa Nostra or Russian organized crime, whose "families" are highly regimented, hierarchal, and almost businesslike. Street gangs are less evolved on the criminal ladder. They are criminal networks whose structure is more informal and less disciplined. Like a cancer, their particular brand of brutality and random violence demoralizes and erodes entire communities.

True law enforcement professionals—that is, detectives, street cops, and federal agents—know that in the evolutionary hierarchy of criminal organizations, gangs occupy the lowest rung of the organized crime ladder. That makes them very dangerous to the average citizen and law enforcement. More sophisticated criminal organizations focus on money-producing crimes and use violence as a tool to enforce the "business" of crime. That does not make them less of a threat to society, but when it comes to gratuitous violence, targeting innocent citizens is bad for their "business." These criminal organizations hide their affiliations with crime families and shun the spotlight. In contrast, gangs use violence to intimidate the public and establish their identity. They publicly display their criminal affiliation through visible tattoos, hand signs, tagging of their turf, and special greetings. Much of their recruiting efforts are directed toward juveniles as young as age thirteen. Their initiation rituals involve violence or forced sex on aspiring members and the verified commission of violent crimes against "civilians." They will rob, kill, and maim simply to gain "respect." They relish the spotlight. The risk of treating gangs like MS-13 as usual threats is that when they do evolve, ditch the tattoos, take up more sophisticated tactics, and become a less visible criminal organization, they will be too entrenched to eradicate. A bad example of this level of entrenchment is the development of the crime families of La Cosa Nostra from the 1920s through the 1960s. These families essentially had a forty-year head start before

law enforcement, particularly the FBI, acknowledged their existence and attacked them as organized crime. It took the next thirty-five years to reduce their presence from over thirty active families to less than a dozen.

Diaz very effectively traces the roots of MS-13, which seemed to burst on the scene in 2004, after a series of well-publicized brutal assaults and homicides took place in the quiet, orderly suburbs of Northern Virginia, in the shadow of our nation's capitol. Particularly shocking was the gang slashing of a pregnant sixteen-year-old federal witness whose mutilated body was found near a tranquil stream in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Overnight, the media and the American public awakened to the presence of a machete-wielding criminal network that hit uncomfortably close to their suburban homes.

Ironically, the presence of MS-13 in America is a self-inflicted disease. As Tom Diaz's research points out, the gang has its roots in the Rampart area of South Los Angeles but proliferated through the policy of deportation of these convicted criminals to what one member described to FBI MS-13 Task Force agents as a "paid vacation" in prisons in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, where they thrived. These facilities are nothing more than gang-controlled universities and training camps. In these "prisons," networks are solidified, members are recruited, doctrine is established, and leaders consolidate their power. During the year 2000, a monthly average of three hundred violent Salvadorian criminals were deported from the United States to El Salvador. Most were MS-13 or 18th Street members. Many of the original Salvatruchans had military training and combat experience as members of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, a Salvadoran rebel group. Upon release, these hardened and better-networked criminals quickly and easily slipped back into the United States and fanned out, establishing new footholds in communities thriving on such industries as meat packing, agriculture, and construction. The story of the notorious MS-13 butcher "El Culiche" (the Tapeworm), is not unusual. He reentered the country after deportation no less than five times, at least twice after killing twenty-eight innocent men, women, and children in an ambush of a busload of passengers traveling the Salvadoran countryside. A State Department report places the number of individual MS-

13 cliques at more than 250, concentrated in the United States, El Salvador, Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. Aggressive government crackdowns like the *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura* in the Central American countries had the effect of pushing even more gang members to cross into the United States.

Reading this book from a law enforcement perspective, it is clear that Tom Diaz has worn out some shoe leather—much like a good detective—in gathering facts, not myths or urban legend. As a result, he has produced an accurate and comprehensive look at a grave and present danger to our society. In the three Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, MS-13 has evolved from a criminal network to a destabilizing force, threatening the very rule of law in those countries. Inability to take control of the streets and protect the public from intimidation is a characteristic of a failed nation-state. Unfortunately, in the United States, arguably the most advanced country in the world, there are far too many failed neighborhoods and communities because of gangs, drugs, and violence.

The challenge of reducing gang violence is formidable, and at times, it seems like the government cannot get out of its own way. Diaz effectively exposes the bureaucratic infighting between federal agencies, as well as the administrative obstacles and congressional lethargy in funding coordinated antigang efforts. Part of the infighting stems from a lack of Executive Branch and congressional leadership in addressing the wasteful and counterproductive overlap in the missions of the FBI; the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; the Drug Enforcement Administration; and the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement—all of whom claim a mandate to address gangs. Despite these conditions, Diaz reveals that, regardless of agency affiliation, the line is held by a handful of dedicated state, local, and federal investigators and, of course, street cops. Their efforts, while heroic, needed a cohesive national focus. The impact of going after a transnational criminal network like MS-13 by arresting them one by one is minimal. Only a well-resourced, fully coordinated national effort focused on digging the network up by the roots will have true impact. That was the basis for the formation of the FBI's MS-13 National Gang Task Force, which has already seen dramatic results with racketeering prosecutions of en-

tire MS-13 cliques in New York, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Charlotte, essentially neutralizing their presence. These indictments typically include twenty or more defendants and charge an array of felonies committed over many years, including multiple homicides. The RICO statute and the enterprise investigative strategy is a proven tool to dismantle networks like MS-13.

As the head of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division for over two years, my experience, from many visits to Capitol Hill to inform staffers and testify about gangs, was that, aside from the strong and persistent efforts of U.S. congressman Frank Wolf, there was a plethora of talk but little action in supporting a sustained effort at attacking gangs in general. While federal law enforcement resources "refocused" on the terrorist threat, local officers were left with a multijurisdictional, international criminal threat that is responsible for far more deaths than the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Unfortunately for local law enforcement, government funding like COPS and Byrne grants, which funded more cops on the street, were cut dramatically over the last seven years. At the same time, over two thousand FBI agents were diverted from criminal investigations to counter terrorism. In a shell game, Congress has failed to fund adequate terrorism resources, forcing the FBI and other agencies to cannibalize seasoned investigators from long-established squads on gangs, narcotics, and organized crime, at a time when gangs were committing mayhem in cities throughout the United States.

Tom Diaz has produced an incredibly incisive work that reads like a novel. Unfortunately, it is an accurate portrayal of a very real and growing threat. The presence of MS-13 has been reported in 147 cities across the United States. It is no longer confined to big cities like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami. The cities infected now include Fairfax, Virginia; Charlotte, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Alpharetta, Georgia; and Colorado Springs, Colorado. There is not much time. Every U.S. congressman and senator should read this book. We ignore its warning at our peril.

Chris Swecker, former assistant director
of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division