

## Cartel Land Discussion Guide

Director: Matthew Heineman

Year: 2015

Time: 100 min

### **You might know this director from:**

Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American  
Healthcare (2012)

Our Time (2009)

## FILM SUMMARY

Director Matthew Heineman is no war reporter. He has never visited the battlefields of Afghanistan or served time on the frontlines of Iraq. After spending just over an hour-and-a-half with him in CARTEL LAND, however, one could easily be convinced otherwise. The bloody, murky, deep dark world of drug cartels and self-appointed border patrols he delivers serve as a spectacle of the most bulletproof of any wartime film.

Upon reading about the Arizona vigilantes, Heineman's interest in the U.S.-Mexican border war was sparked. Finding out about the Autodefensas, Mexico's answer to vigilantism in the bleeding heart of drug cartel territory, offered him the parallel story south of the border. In a real-life tale often reminiscent of the series "Breaking Bad," CARTEL LAND crosses the safe lines of storytelling and offers images of meth chefs cooking a batch, of Foley and Mireles - the respective leaders of the Arizona and Mexican vigilantes - at their most intimate, and of the everyday Mexicans crying out at the persistent injustices carving out the shape of their existence.

Rather than filling space with statistics and presenting a film based on failed politics, Heineman offers a human tale. Every which way he turns in Mexico, corruption reigns. Not even the people's savior, El Doctor Mireles, is clean, his marriage crumbling under the weight of betrayal, and the Mexican people remain suspended in a state of endless suffering as the government remains in cahoots with the drug cartels, who rule the roost south of the border. North of the border, Nailer and his unlegislated co-workers take matters into their own hands.

As gunshots resound, as bodies fall, as the certainty of terror rules across Mexico, as the good-ish guys serve time while the dirty ones rise through the ranks, CARTEL LAND shoots out of the raging, uninterrupted battlefield. The dark echo of one meth cook's voice is all that remains: "We're the lucky ones...for now."

## FILM THEMES

In the words of self-appointed border vigilante Tim Foley, “I believe what I am doing is good. I believe what I am standing up against is evil.” Once the immensely multi-layered scenario in the world of Mexican drug cartels unfolds, however, poverty and despair seem the only certainties.

### THE BORDERLAND BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

Along the U.S.-Mexican border, a long stretch of high desert offers an indivisible line between two nations with much in common - and much in dispute. “This is the wild west. There’s nothing down here. There’s no law,” stated Arizona vigilante Foley. Taking border patrol into his own hands, he works to keep illegals out and protect his country from what he sees as an imminent threat. South of his homeland, the Mexican population is immersed in crisis, with innocent individuals struggling to steer clear of omnipotent cartels. The border between good and evil seems not geographical but philosophical, with cartels firmly occupying the evil seat.

### POVERTY AS THE PURPOSE

The distribution of wealth is extremely unbalanced in Mexico, with poverty taking over as the driving force behind many citizens’ daily decisions and lifestyles. In the words of one meth cook, “We know we do harm with all the drugs, but what are we going to do? We come from poverty.” With little money and few opportunities to live a life in the clean and clear, people often reach for the available options, and drug cartels flourish where desperation abounds. The high road - a life of calm, thoughtful decisions - is only afforded to those with the means.

### VIGILANTES

Where is the U.S. government in all of this, the border patrol in place to keep the American border safe, many ask? Rather than waiting around for something improbable to happen, Foley and associates slide into the role of on-site vigilantes, a position firmly rooted in the American psyche. When the system in place fails, some see no other option than to grab hold of the reins themselves, as in the case of the Arizona vigilantes and Mexican Autodefensas. In the words of Mireles, “When the government can’t provide basic security for its people, we can take up arms in legitimate defense of our lives, our families.”

### WHERE’S THE GOOD GUY?

Hope seemed to peek out across the horizon with the arrival of the Autodefensas, a group by the people for the people. Around the time of their first anniversary as an organized group, however, corruption reared its ugly head, exposing the dirt permeating each and every crevice in this continuing crisis. “Some of the leaders who make the rules are the first to break them,” stated an Autodefensa member. Corruption runs rampant in a society built upon lopsided ideals, when the government works alongside cartels and drug dealing offers more opportunities than lime picking. “It is just a neverending cycle,” one of the meth cooks declares. By the end of CARTEL LAND, the sensible conclusion is that dirt breeds dirt and good guys are scarce, as the Gandhi figure of reform in all of this - El Doctor - woos yet another mistress to his side.

**“There’s an imaginary line out there between right and wrong, good and evil.”**

Tim “Nailer” Foley

**“We can’t become the criminals we’re fighting against.”**

Jose Manuel Mireles, “El Doctor”

**“If we start paying attention to our hearts, then we’ll get screwed over.”**

Mexican meth cook



## FILM FACTS:

- Following its 2015 premiere at the U.S. Documentary Competition at Sundance, CARTEL LAND captured numerous awards, including both a Cinematography and Directing Award at Sundance and Best Film of the Documentary Competition at the Moscow International Film Festival. The film was also nominated for such prestigious accolades as the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and Best American Feature Film at the Champs-Élysées Film Festival.
- Director Heineman had just completed his previous film, “Escape Fire,” about the U.S. healthcare system, when he read an article in “Rolling Stone” about the Arizona vigilantes. After speaking with Nailer for a few months, he began filming him in the summer of 2013. After five months with Nailer, Heineman’s father sent him an article about the Autodefensas, which gave him the idea of the parallel story of vigilantism in the U.S.-Mexico War on Drugs.
- Director Heineman spent a total of 9 months in Mexico filming CARTEL LAND, during which time he never carried a weapon and formed a great deal of trust with his subjects to be granted intimate access. When he went to Mexico for the film’s release, he had a bodyguard with him.
- Heineman has a basic knowledge of Spanish, but needed an interpreter for most negotiations.
- The footage from the meth lab was shot on Heineman’s last day in Mexico.
- Poverty in Mexico continues to be a major force behind the drug trade, which offers quick access to money. As of 2013, 44% of the Mexican population lived beneath the national poverty line. Wealth is very unevenly distributed in the country, with 10% of the wealthiest having 42% of all income, and 10% of the poorest with 1%.
- The United States spends approximately \$51 billion annually in the War on Drugs.
- Methamphetamine was first developed in Japan in 1919, and was widely used in WWII to keep troops awake. In 1970, it was classified as an illegal drug by the U.S. government. In 2012, 1.2 million Americans reported using it over the course of that year. The manufacture of meth produces substantial environmental waste.
- Between 2007 and 2014, more than 100,000 Mexicans were killed in the war against drug cartels in the country, and over 26,000 have gone missing. Between 2008 and 2014, 47,000 migrants were killed in organized crime as they attempted to cross the border into the U.S. Guns feature greatly in the Mexican drug war, although there is only one legal firearms retailer in the country, as compared to 6,700 licensed firearms dealers in the U.S. along the border with Mexico.
- “Vigilante” is Spanish for “watchman” or “guard.” Vigilantism is deeply rooted in U.S. society, as the first settlers were not protected by a criminal justice system and had to fend for themselves.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn from its story.
2. **Find** out how to get involved, and educate yourself up on the legislation behind the violence at [the Drug Policy Alliance](#) - an organization actively working to reform U.S. drug policy.
3. **Get** another perspective on life in Mexico and the long and perilous journey many economic migrants make to the United States, by watching WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL? (2013), featuring Gael García Bernal.
4. **Support** [Students for Liberty](#) that are actively campaigning to make a positive impact in the U.S. War on Drugs.
5. **Find** out what causes the violence and bloodshed in the Mexican Drug War. Learn more about [Stop the Drug War](#) believe that drug reforms and legalization should be explored.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**