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By Ralph Blumenthal

The headline in The New York Times that morning in 1984 was macabre, if unintentionally hilarious: “Unknown Arm of Sicilian Mafia Is Uncovered in the United States.”

The arm in question was not a body part but rather an overseas cell of the Italian criminal underworld operating alongside its better-known American counterpart — the Bonanno family in Brooklyn. Through neighborhood fronts around the country, the Italians had been masterminding the billion-dollar heroin pipeline that became known as the Pizza Connection.

What Americans didn’t know at the time was that five years earlier a pair of F.B.I. agents operating out of a hole-in-the-wall on Queens Boulevard had stumbled on the trail that led to the cell — and to a storied Italian-American law enforcement partnership that eventually destroyed the invincibility of the Mafia on both sides of the ocean and built a sturdy alliance that continues to this day.

Now, law enforcement experts wonder if there are lessons that can be applied to the escalating crisis in Mexico, where close to 500 police officers and soldiers have died at the hands of warring drug gangs since 2006. Is there something in the way the Americans and Italians worked together that could be applied to a partnership with the Mexicans? Certainly it is in the interest of the United States to seek such an alliance to stop the flow of drugs, guns and crime across the border, just as the Italian alliance helped stop that flow across the Atlantic. Indeed, President Bush has been pushing Congress to approve the first \$500 million installment of a crime-fighting aid package to Mexico. Last week, American border governors met in Mexico with President Felipe Calderón to rally support for the effort and praise him for focusing on the drug lords.

And for its part, Mexico, struggling with a problem that seems to get bloodier and more intractable with each passing week, might well benefit from the expertise and experience of American law enforcement.

But the hurdles are high. Trust was a cornerstone of the American-Italian collaboration, and as hard as that trust was to gain, it could be even harder to achieve closer to home. With the trust built, though, the Italian collaboration thrived. For a start, investigators on both sides shared crucial intelligence. Equally crucially, Americans conducted operations that the Italian police lacked the legal authority to do in their own country — making drug buys, for example, and eavesdropping and conducting electronic surveillance. Perhaps most important, the Americans were able to guard endangered informers in the Federal Witness Protection Program.

In some ways, the Mexicans are ahead of where the Italians started, said Pino Arlacchi, an Italian sociologist and former senator who devised Italy's most effective weapon against the mob, the D.I.A., or Direzione Investigativa Antimafia. Even into the 1980's, Mr. Arlacchi said, the Italian government knew little about the shadowy Cosa Nostra. The enemy the Mexicans are fighting is not so entrenched and impenetrable as the Sicilian Mafia was, said Mr. Arlacchi, who served in the 1990's as United Nations under secretary general for drug control. Rather, he said, the Mexicans face a fragmented and loose confederation of heavily armed feuding gangs with a propensity for public killings unmatched by the Mafia. That makes them more dangerously unpredictable, yes, but also, in theory, easier to overcome.

"The things we're seeing in Mexico today, we saw the same glimmers in Italy" — the beginnings of a crusade — said Charlie Rooney, recalling the days when he and his F.B.I. partner, Carmine Russo, puzzled over the brazen assassination of the fearsome Bonanno family boss Carmine Galante, in the backyard of an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn's Bushwick section in 1979.

Five years and millions of agent-hours later, the trail had led to a worldwide money laundering empire; a fugitive Sicilian boss of bosses, Gaetano Badalamenti, in Spain; one of the largest drug trafficking rings ever exposed; and the discovery of the franchise of the Sicilian Mafia in America.

It would take similar patience also in Mexico, said Mr. Rooney, now a private investigator in Virginia. "You have to have the will to fight and identify those you can work with."

The last was a tall order at the time, particularly when it came to partnerships in Italy, said Tom Sheer, who as assistant F.B.I. director in New York was Agent Rooney's boss. Italian officials, with some reason, were widely distrusted as corrupt. And the F.B.I. was not known for its generosity with colleagues, acknowledged Mr. Sheer, now a security consultant in Florida. "We

were the catchers,” he said. “They pitched, we caught.”

The Americans were indeed difficult partners, said Mr. Arlacchi, then an academic studying the Mafia and later an Italian government adviser. “We considered the Americans arrogant,” he recalled. “They just wanted to get information, not give. We gave them everything and they said, ‘Thank you very much.’ ”

The resentment turned to alarm, Mr. Arlacchi said, when American agents started operating in Italy, making undercover drug buys — forbidden to the Italian police. At one point, he said, Giovanni Falcone, Italy’s leading investigative magistrate and anti-Mafia champion, threatened to arrest the Americans. But relations turned around after Judge Falcone and his wife, who was also a judge, and three bodyguards were assassinated in the bombing of their motorcade near Palermo in May 1992. Weeks later, his successor, Paolo Borsellino, was blown up.

“We told the Americans there was no reason not to trust us,” Mr. Arlacchi said. “We were risking our lives.”

Soon Italian and American investigators were working hand in hand, and the F.B.I. was protecting the most valuable Sicilian Mafia boss ever to turn snitch, Tommaso Buscetta, who became a star witness in New York.

In Mexico, a collaboration of sorts, albeit a looser one, already exists, which is a good start. Mexican officials say they enjoy their highest level of cooperation ever with the F.B.I. and Drug Enforcement Administration. Like the Italians, they say, they have created new legal tools patterned on American statutes to seize criminal assets, and they have asked the Americans to help protect crucial witnesses and extradite drug lords.

And like the Italians who sought to insulate the police from retaliation and corruption by flooding Sicily with outsiders, police officers from the north, the Mexicans have replaced local officers with 27,000 federal police officers and 30,000 troops. And they too have paid a price: of the 4,402 deaths from the violence since late 2006, at least 449 have been officers and soldiers, says the Mexican attorney general, Eduardo Medina-Mora.

Some experts, however, question whether the two nations have shed enough of their suspicion to reach the cohesion achieved by the United States and Italy. Mr. Calderón has bridled at American conditions that would tie aid to greater transparency on the Mexican military's human rights record.

The Americans, in turn, the Mexicans say, need to do more to control their drug demand and the gun traffic across the border — weapons that are killing their police officers.

Some wonder too whether Mexico, struggling with poverty, can bring to bear the resources mobilized by a wealthier nation like Italy.

The way Mr. Medina-Mora, sees it, Mexico has no choice. "If we do not win it together," he said, "we will lose it together."

Ralph Blumenthal, a reporter for The New York Times, is the author of "Last Days of the Sicilians: The F.B.I.'s War Against the Mafia."