The Narco Tunnels of Nogales

The 10-inch-wide entrance to a smuggler's tunnel uncovered in Arizona in August 2011


The web of passages beneath the border town reflects the power and ingenuity of the Sinaloa cartel
By Adam Higginbotham

If everyone had kept quiet, it could have been the most valuable parking spot on earth. Convenient only to the careworn clothing stores clustered in the southern end of downtown Nogales, Ariz., it offered little to shoppers, and mile-long Union Pacific trains sometimes cut it off from much of the city for 20 minutes at a time. But the location was perfect: In the middle of the short stretch of East International Street, overshadowed by the blank walls of quiet commercial property, the space was less than 50 feet from the international border with Mexico.

On Aug. 16, 2011, just before 3:30 p.m., three men sat in a white Chevrolet box truck parked near the Food City supermarket on Grand Court Plaza. In the driver's seat was Anthony Maytorena; at 19, Maytorena already had an impressive criminal record, and a metal brace on one arm as a result of being shot while fleeing from local police three years earlier. Locked in the cargo compartment behind him were two boys from Nogales, Sonora, the Arizona town's twin city on the other side of the border—Jorge Vargas-Ruiz, 18, and another so young that his name has never been released. Together they drove over to International Street, where two cars were holding the parking spot for them.

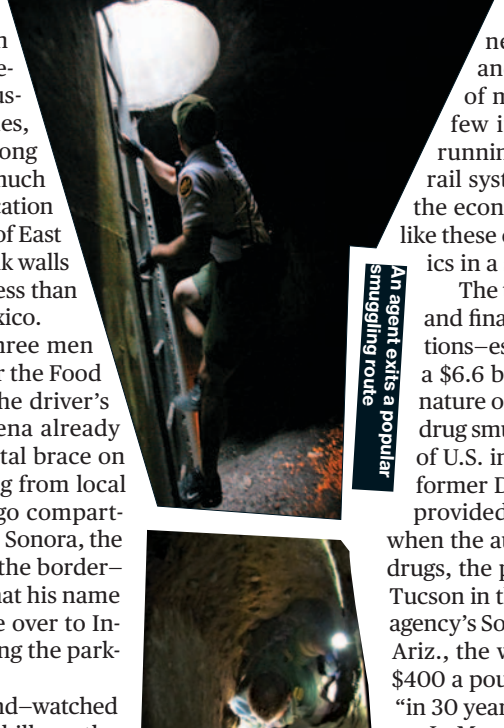
Maytorena parked the truck, climbed out, and—watched by a spotter gazing down from high up in the hills on the Sonoran side of the border—sauntered around the corner. Inside, the two teenagers lifted a hatch in the floor of the cargo compartment; beneath, in the steel box that had once contained the truck's refrigeration unit, was a trapdoor that opened less than a foot above the street.

On a word from the spotter, men underground lowered a camouflaged circular plug of concrete held in place by a hydraulic jack, revealing a hole just 10 inches in diameter. The hole opened into a tunnel 3 feet square and 90 feet long, leading to a room in an abandoned hotel on the Mexican side of the border. It took less than 40 minutes to transfer 207 tightly wrapped bundles of marijuana from the San Enrique hotel to the back of the truck: more than 2,600 pounds in all, conservatively valued at just over a million dollars.

U.S. Border Patrol agents and officers of the Nogales Police Department rode slowly past the truck while the transfer took place. None of them noticed anything unusual. Customs officers manning the pedestrian border crossing at the end of the street continued their work as normal. With the cylindrical plug jacked back into place, the boys in the back of the truck used a caulking gun to close the seam around it with concrete sealant. Once again, the tunnel entrance in the parking space was invisible. As the truck pulled away at a little before 4:30 p.m., it had begun to rain. Behind the wheel, Maytorena almost certainly believed the tunnel operation had been yet another audacious success.

Crime has been coming up out of the ground in Nogales for a while now. Since 1995 more than 90 illicit underground passageways have been discovered in various states of completion in the two-mile stretch of urban frontier that separates Arizona's Nogales from its far larger twin in Sonora. Twenty-two complete tunnels have been found in the past three years alone. Streets have opened up beneath unwary pedestrians and subsided under heavy vehicles; the city has become infamous as the Tunnel Capital of the Southwest.

Although quantification is impossible, the underground shipment routes represent a significant economic investment, one that far exceeds the time and money spent on the homemade submarines, ultralight aircraft, and catapults used to move narcotics elsewhere. Some tunnels cost at least a million dollars to build and require architects, engineers, and teams of miners to work for months at a stretch. A few include spectacular feats of engineering, running as much as 100 feet deep, with electric rail systems, elevators, and hydraulic doors. But the economies of scale are extraordinary. Tunnels like these can be used to move several tons of narcotics in a single night.



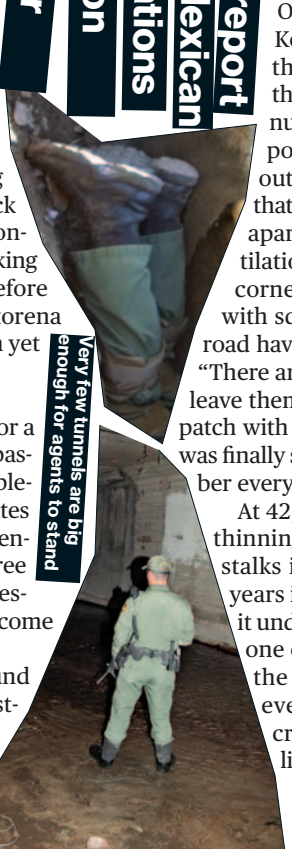
An agent exits a popular smuggling route

The tunneling boom reflects not only the extent and financial torque of the Mexican cartels' operations—estimated in a 2010 Rand Corp. report to turn a $6.6 billion profit every year—but also the futile nature of attempts to secure the U.S. border against drug smugglers. A reliable index of the effectiveness of U.S. interdiction work, says Anthony Coulson, a former Drug Enforcement Administration agent, is provided by the price of narcotics on U.S. streets; when the authorities succeed in impeding the flow of drugs, the price goes up. Coulson began his career in Tucson in the early '80s and retired as the head of the agency's Southern Arizona district in 2010. In Nogales, Ariz., the wholesale price for marijuana is currently $400 a pound. "That's never changed," Coulson says, "in 30 years."

A 2010 Rand Corp. report estimated that the Mexican cartels' drug operations turn a $6.6 billion profit every year

In March, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement responded by organizing a Nogales Tunnel Task Force, headed by agents from its Homeland Security Investigations division (HSI), and incorporating members of the DEA, Border Patrol, and the local police department. In early June, President Obama signed into law the Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2012, introduced by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), chairman of the bipartisan Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control. The law extends the use of wiretapping to tunnel investigations, criminalizes the intent to tunnel, and doubles the sentences for traffickers who use tunnels to move narcotics. It's the House's second recent attempt to legislate against the persistence and ingenuity of the tunnel barons of the Sinaloa cartel.

On a searing afternoon in late June, Border Patrol Agent Kevin Hecht guides his rumbling Dodge pickup along the incline of West International Street and picks out the highlights of the tunnelers' work. The blue house at number 438, where smugglers came up under the front porch and bundled the loads directly into a car parked outside; and the apartment building at 530, so popular that two tunnels intersected underground there, five years apart. "One was real fancy—all wood-lined, lighting, ventilation, power outlets. All hand-dug," Hecht says. At the corner of West Street, he points down to asphalt quilted with squares of fresh concrete, where tunnels beneath the road have been located and filled in all the way to the border. "There are some hot spots they like," he says. "They just won't leave them alone." The city's repair crews have inscribed each patch with a date, so Hecht can keep track of when each tunnel was finally sealed. "There's so many of them here, I can't remember every little square," he says. "I'm getting old."



Very few tunnels are big enough for agents to stand

At 42, Hecht is a big man, 6 feet tall and 230 pounds, with thinning black hair sticking straight up from his scalp like stalks in a burned cornfield. Raised in Chicago, he has 17 years in the Border Patrol, all of it in Nogales—and much of it underground. "He's the tunnel guru," says Jack Zappone, one of Hecht's former colleagues, now an HSI agent with the Tunnel Task Force. "Just about every tunnel that's ever been found in Nogales, he's been inside of it or crawled through. And he knows the drainage system like the back of his hand."

Hecht's opponents in the tunnel war are drawn to

PHOTOS: AP PHOTOS(1); REUTERS(2); ZUMA(1)
GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK; SATELLITE IMAGE: USGS

Nogales by a peculiar alignment of geography and geology, and the shared infrastructure of a city where once-common interests are now divided by the drug war. The two cities grew up around the border crossing, and on both sides houses and stores now press as close to the line as the law permits. Nogales, Sonora, sits on high ground, with its Arizona twin below it, in the narrowest part of a valley forming the end of a seasonal flood plain. When the monsoons begin each summer, the rain that falls on Mexico is funneled downhill, gathering speed and force as it reaches the U.S. In the 1930s, in an attempt to control the torrent of water, U.S. engineers converted the natural arroyos in Nogales into a pair of culverts that now lie beneath two of the city's main downtown streets, Morley Avenue and Grand Avenue. Beginning in Mexico, and running beneath the border before emerging a mile into the U.S., the huge tunnels—large enough to drive a car through—created an underground link between the two cities, and access to a network of subterranean passages beneath both that has never been fully mapped.

Above ground, Nogales is also well-situated for easy access to the rest of the U.S.; I-19 begins less than 100 yards from the border. According to Coulson, more than a third of all fresh produce shipped into the country from Mexico now comes through the city's huge Mariposa port of entry for commercial vehicles—and, packed with it, much of the country's narcotics. "Nogales," Coulson allows, "is a little bit unusual."

In the 1990s the Grand and Morley tunnels were transformed into conduits of illegal immigration and drug smuggling. The Border Patrol installed corrugated steel gates, made from repurposed military surplus, at the underground border, which they chained and then welded shut. But during the monsoons, the tunnels—30 feet wide and 14 feet deep—often fill with rushing water, which in the Morley tunnel generates such pressure that it spews out of the open end a mile downstream in Arizona with the force of a water cannon. The summer storms arrive with such sudden ferocity that unwary migrants were often swept to their deaths, and the solid metal gates were torn from the walls. And when the monsoons didn't open the gates, drug smugglers and human traffickers would.

"We'd weld the gates shut, and then five minutes after we'd weld them, they'd break the welds," says Tom Pittman, who began his career with the Border Patrol in Nogales a few months after Hecht in 1995. "Back then there would be hundreds of people coming through those tunnels, all day, every day." When the Patrol stationed men at the main exit of the Grand, where it emerges into an open culvert near the public library, migrants and smugglers began appearing from the scores of storm drains and manhole covers across the city—carrying their shoes in plastic bags to keep them dry, disappearing into downtown stores in the hope of mingling with shoppers. "It was crazy. You would see a sewer plate come up in the middle of the street, and five people would come up and run," says Zappone. Drug smugglers pushed bundles of cocaine and marijuana out through the gratings, or wriggled up the two-foot-wide corrugated steel tubes that connected the main drainage channels to concrete catch basins on the city streets, handing off their loads to accomplices in waiting cars.

Border agents took to entering the tunnels without turning on their flashlights. "If they see you coming, they're just going to run back to Mexico. You'd get in there and hang out, and wait for the groups, or the dope, to come to you," says Pittman.

When orphans and runaways began living in the Grand and the Morley, the tunnels became so dangerous that border agents would only go below ground in force. At mealtimes, gangs of tunnel kids would materialize suddenly from the drainage grates outside Church's Chicken on Grand Avenue, terrifying diners into flight, stealing their food and withdrawing below ground to eat it in safety; at other times they huffed paint and robbed passing migrants at knifepoint. Without the protection of a SWAT team, the agents

Under the Border

January 1999
Agents discover two tunnels, in a home and adjoining apartment across from a Catholic school. While the longer of the two appeared to stretch 400 feet, it was never fully explored because of safety concerns.

October 1999
Investigators trace 1,089 pounds of marijuana and 1,254 pounds of cocaine to a tunnel on Loma Street. While interviewing neighbors, agents find a second tunnel under construction next door.

February 2001
Agents discover a tunnel entrance at what seems a typical family home. The family is gone, but agents do find 840 pounds of cocaine.

August 1995
The first known tunnel was found in the basement of an abandoned Methodist church (now an empty lot). The tunnel went down 40 feet to the Grand Avenue storm conduit. No drugs were seized.

November 2011
Authorities find a tunnel under a deck at one home and, fifteen days later, a second under the bedroom of a house down the block.

August 2010
A tunnel beneath the DeConcini port of entry is discovered when the road collapses beneath a bus crossing into Mexico.

June 2000
Agents find a 20-foot tunnel leading to a home off Morley Avenue after hearing the crackling of radios in the storm drain. Smugglers abandon 310 pounds of marijuana.

December 2009
A sinkhole at the border crossing leads to the discovery of a smuggling tunnel.

September 2003
A 330-yard-long tunnel equipped with rails for moving cocaine is discovered. Authorities arrest "Don Rigo" Gaxiola, the only senior cartel figure yet prosecuted for tunnel-building in Nogales.

March 2012
A 100-foot-long tunnel descending from high ground in Mexico is discovered.

June 2007
As ICE and DEA agents uncover a tunnel entrance in a Nogales home, Sonoran State Police arrest five suspects at the tunnel's other end.

August 2011
The "parking meter" tunnel to the San Enrique hotel in Mexico is found.

could no longer even reach underground as far as the border; by the end of the 1990s, control of this concrete netherworld had slipped almost entirely from the grasp of the law. Deep inside the Grand, Hecht swings the beam of his rubber-clad flashlight across the cement floor, a half mile or so from the border. "We wouldn't have been able to get to this point," he says. "We would have been shot at."

Finally, in 2007, the Border Patrol installed a set of gates with bars designed to allow water to pass through but keep people at bay, and the giant drainage tunnels have become far safer. In the Grand now, three sets of barriers mark the border: one gate at the line, and two more on either side to protect it from tampering. By the amber glow of a single bulb, video cameras and other sensors Hecht refuses to describe monitor the space; a device to remotely dispense pepper spray further discourages unwanted visitors. For good measure, Hecht's colleagues have scrawled a message in green paint on the wall on the northern side of the line. "USA TUNNEL RATS," it reads. "ESTE LUGAR ES DE NOSOTROS." This place is ours.

Smugglers use Nogales's drainage pipes as a link between routes

The closest Hecht and Pittman have come to meeting their adversaries underground is when they've caught a whiff of cigarette smoke blown in as a warning—from, at most, 10 feet away

Hecht is one of the few who enter the small dirt tunnels

The Aug. 16, 2011, haul: 2,600 pounds of marijuana

Investigators estimated that Guzman's James Bond tunnel cost more than $1.5 million to build, and moved so much cocaine Guzman earned the nickname "El Rapido"

The first drug-smuggling tunnel found beneath the border was discovered in May 1990, 100 miles west of Nogales, in Douglas, Ariz. It was 270 feet long, with its southern entrance concealed beneath a pool table at a house in Agua Prieta, Mexico, the favored cross-border drug transfer point for "Shorty" Guzman, infamous head of the Sinaloa cartel. When the spigot of a tap outside the house was turned, the table rose eight feet into the air on hydraulic rams, revealing a vaulted, concrete-lined tunnel strung with electric lights and equipped with a wheeled cart. The passageway emerged beneath the drainage grate of a truck-washing station in Douglas, built on land sold to Guzman's lawyer by a local judge. Customs agents who examined the tunnel said that it looked like something out of a James Bond movie.

At the time the existence of the subterranean expressways of the Morley and the Grand, and the relatively poor security at the city's crossing stations, made custom-built tunnels in Nogales unnecessary. But as the Mexican cartels gained strength in the '90s, and seizures increased above ground, smugglers began modifying the city's drainage system for their own purposes. In August 1995 customs agents, following a tip, uncovered a narrow hand-dug tunnel that emerged beneath an abandoned Methodist church on a bluff 150 yards from the border. Just 40 feet long, it had been dug between the church and a hole cut in the side of an underground drainage pipe connecting a nearby rainwater catch basin to the Grand tunnel. It would have enabled traffickers to enter the U.S. through the Grand and then climb into the corrugated pipe—but rather than emerging on the street, they could now take a detour to the basement of the church, where they could deliver their loads entirely out of sight and undetected. The tunnel was crude—"a gopher hole," one agent called it—and investigators believed a cave-in had forced smugglers to abandon the route before they'd had the chance to use it. But it was an ingenious idea, and not one the cartel was about to give up on easily.

In 1999 authorities found three more tunnels leading back to the storm drain system, and in one the ropes and burlap sacks used to haul narcotics in from Mexico. In early 2001, Tom Pittman helped in the discovery of another hand-dug tunnel, hidden behind a hinged flap in the wall of another corrugated 24-inch drainage pipe, less than a mile from the border. It led to a three-bedroom house. When customs agents kicked in the door, they found what appeared to be an ordinary, middle-class suburban home. Scattered with children's toys, the living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms looked entirely normal; what they found in the third bedroom did not: "840 pounds of coke," Pittman says. "Stacks of it. All muddy. Dirt and s--- everywhere." The family had already left town. Customs later estimated the value of the cocaine at $6.5 million. As with many of the tunnels, Pittman says it's impossible to tell how long the smuggling operation had been running. "Probably quite some time, unfortunately," he says. "Years."

As border security tightened after September 11, smugglers began going under the fence in Nogales ever more frequently. "There's a direct correlation between tunnels and the strength of enforcement at the ports of entry," says Coulson. "As the ports got stronger in their inspection capabilities, more tunnels came into play." In 2005, Shorty Guzman launched a bloody campaign of assassinations in Nogales, intended to bring the independent smuggling contractors of the city, many of them families whose expertise goes back generations, entirely under his control. Since then new tunnels have been discovered in the Border Patrol's Tucson sector at a rate of one a month—almost every one of them in Nogales. The new gates in the drainage system mean that an in-

creasing number of these are hand-dug for their entire length, directly connecting Sonora with Arizona. Some are sophisticated, but many are rough, dirt-walled passageways, made using only picks, shovels, and hammer drills. According to one HSI case agent who asked not to be named, citing security concerns, the excavation is often done by men from the massive copper mine in Cananea, two hours' drive to the southeast in Mexico; power for tools and ventilation is provided by electricians who tap into the supplies of businesses operating overhead.

Pittman and Hecht began navigating the hand-dug tunnels together in 2006. It's now part of the Border Patrol's regular duties to make sweeps of the Morley and the Grand, and a quarter of the 700-strong force of the Patrol's Nogales station have the confined-space training necessary to enter the drainage system. The number of them prepared to enter the precarious and claustrophobic dirt tunnels is far smaller. "A best guess, maybe 10 are willing to do it," Hecht says. "You can't force them."

None of the tunnels Hecht and Pittman have explored have ever been large enough to allow them to stand upright, and most require belly crawling; many are so narrow Pittman can only navigate them by stretching his arms out in front of him and pushing with his toes. Both agents fear being trapped by a collapse. While some of the tunnels are shored up with props, many are not. "I still get scared going in, every time," Pittman admits.

Below ground, the air is thick, humid, and often dangerously low on oxygen. The agents look for signs of cracking or the small piles of dirt that can presage a cave-in. Before entering a newly discovered tunnel, Hecht closes off any roads that may pass overhead, and brings in a truck carrying a ventilation system to blow in air. Inside, there is usually no room for the agents to wear a gun belt or flak jacket; they carry flashlights; one holds a pistol. The single thing Hecht says he never wants to see in a tunnel is someone else coming toward him with a gun. With no space to turn around, and potentially trapped from behind by his partner, he knows that such an encounter would almost certainly be fatal. "The only thing you can really do is hope you're the one who shoots first … and hope the concussion from the shot doesn't collapse the tunnel," Pittman says.

The closest Hecht and Pittman have come to meeting their adversaries face-to-face underground are the times when, approaching the end of a tunnel, they've caught a whiff of cigarette or marijuana smoke, deliberately blown into the southern end by someone—at most, 10 feet away—as a warning. When that happened to Hecht, he stopped dead where he was. "I smelled it and went, 'I'm out,'" he says.

Usually all the agents find in the tunnels are homemade picks, the pieces of string and tape measures used for navigation, and gallon jugs filled with fermenting urine. The men themselves are almost always long gone, vanished back into Mexico.

In the 17 years since tunnels were first found in Nogales, only one of the senior cartel figures behind them has ever been brought to justice. In 2003, Shorty Guzman's senior lieutenant Rigoberto Gaxiola Medina, aka Don Rigo, was arrested in a joint operation with Mexican authorities after wiretaps proved he'd ordered construction of a 985-foot tunnel beneath Nogales equipped with a rail system to move narcotics. In 2008 a Mexican judge sentenced him to 11 years in prison.

According to Coulson, who oversaw the sting from the U.S. side, subsequent work has been hampered by the competing demands of the Border Patrol, which wants to close down any tunnel found as soon as possible, and ICE and DEA, which need to keep them open long enough to gather the evidence for trials. "We need to get away from the interdiction agencies calling the shots," Coulson says, "and get the investigative agencies making determinations on when a tunnel should be closed or not."

The tunnel conspirators federal agents catch are usually the expendable ones, small-town troublemakers like Anthony Maytorena. HSI agents had received a call from an informant before he'd even reached the parking space on East International Street. He was arrested as he attempted to deliver his load; the boys locked in the back were caught as they tried to escape. Maytorena told federal agents he had acted as driver in exchange for $500 in cash and the canceling of a $1,000 debt he owed the cartel after losing part of a previous shipment. In February, having pleaded guilty to conspiracy with intent to distribute marijuana in a U.S. district court in Arizona, he was sentenced to five years in prison. But whoever excavated the 90-foot tunnel, and whoever paid them to do it, remain at large.

Once located, tunnels are filled with concrete

"We'd weld the gates shut, and then five minutes later they'd break the weld," says Pittman. "Hundreds were coming through the tunnels every day"

The equivalent of plainclothes police detectives to the beat cops of Border Patrol, the HSI agents in Nogales are now trying to dismantle the network that supports and finances the tunnels. Despite the provisions of the Tunnel Prevention Act and the creation of the Tunnels Task Force, this will not be easy. The head of the unit is ICE Assistant Special Agent in Charge Kevin Kelly—a 20-year customs veteran who keeps a pair of handcuffs in the cup-holder of his car, next to a bottle of Purell and his BlackBerry. Kelly says almost all the tunnels now found in Nogales are linked to the Sinaloa cartel. Responsibility for the passageways and the territory under which they're built is subdivided among cartel lieutenants. Many tunnels are franchises run by owner-operators who charge some smugglers for each shipment they move. The HSI agents believe a handful of individual cartel cells are dedicated to tunnel construction in the city and responsible for every one of the illegal passageways built beneath Nogales over the years. Under the control of longtime Guzman associate Felipe de Jesus Casinales Soza, aka Gigio, each of these groups works on two or three projects at a time, expecting that federal tunnel rats will shut down every new route sooner or later.

Investigators back in 1990 estimated Shorty Guzman's James Bond tunnel cost more than $1.5 million to construct, but may have been in use for six months or even longer, moving so much cocaine that Guzman earned the new nickname "El Rapido" from his awestruck Colombian partners. Kelly says the short, crude tunnels beneath Nogales, costing as little as $30,000 each to build, represent a relatively small investment for a quick return. "Most of the time the tunnels in Nogales are short-lived," he says. "People talk."

Coulson isn't so sure. His years working beneath Nogales make him think there were always more tunnels than his agents could ever discover, and that one in particular has been open for longer than most federal agents would like to imagine. "We've always guessed that they've drilled through the rock up on the hill on the east side of Nogales. We'd heard about a tunnel there, but could never find it. I think there's a tunnel on that side, and it's been in operation for a long time. Ten years—easily."

One Tuesday morning in June, a dozen of Kelly's agents clamber into three unmarked SUVs to conduct what he calls "knock and talks" in the streets of the city: banging on doors at suspect addresses, asking politely to search the premises for signs of tunneling. The agents, with holstered guns, walkie-talkies, and wearing flak jackets, can't find anyone at the first house, but run the plates of a car that takes a slow drive by as they bang on the door; the second is a cramped brick home a mile from the border, where a woman who lives with eight children says she often hears strange noises at night from the vacant house next door; in the third, a business with easy access to the drainage system, an employee suggests he might be able to help, just as long as his colleagues aren't around. But there's no sign of a tunnel in any of them. Afterwards, Zappone, a supervisor on the day's operation, explains that all three addresses are still worthy of further investigation. There's no hurry; they'll be back. "Holes don't move," he says. B

PHOTOS: JOSHUA LOTT/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX(3); REUTERS(1)

Company Index:
Union Pacific (UNP)
Obama, Barack
Feinstein, Dianne