

Mexico's New Spirit

by Sergio Aguayo

Mexico's perceptions of the United States have changed very little during the past five decades. What has undergone a total transformation, however, is the atmosphere in which they are formed. This change reached its culmination with the defeat of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) at the polls on July 2, 2000, and the presidential victory of Vicente Fox. The end of the PRI's dominion after 72 years of authoritarian and often viscerally anti-American rule would seem to augur well for improvements in Mexican-American relations, and in many ways it does. But along with political change has come a new and more self-confident spirit of Mexican nationalism that will pose challenges for the United States.

In order to peer into the future, however, we must first reenter the past. Our two countries have a long common history, stretching back to the 16th century, that has profoundly influenced Mexican society and its attitudes toward the United States.

Today, from the Mexican perspective, we are entering the fourth phase of a long and complicated relationship. During the first centuries of our common history, the 13 American colonies were the weaker part, and New Spain the regional power. When this balance was reversed during the 19th century, the growing influence of the United States gradually damaged its positive image among Mexico's elite.

As late as 1821, Mexican leaders, having wrested independence from Spain, turned eagerly to the north in search of a national role model. But the American elite reacted with a combination of indifference and disdain. For them, Mexico was little more than a potential source of land and raw materials. John Adams put this early American view in explicitly racist terms when he said that there could never be "democracy among the birds, the beasts, or the fishes, or among the peoples of Latin America." Such beliefs provided the rationale for America's undisguised exploitation of an "inferior" people and its pursuit of its "manifest destiny."

In 1848, a Mexican nation weakened by internal conflict and vanquished on the battlefield in the Mexican-American War surrendered half of its national territory to the United States. That conflict inaugurated the second phase of the Mexican-American relationship, but it also left a more lasting scar on Mexican consciousness. After the war, Mexico closed in on itself, doing everything in its power to forget the arrogant and aggressive neighbor that had delivered its humiliating defeat. Among intellectuals, scholars, and others, research



“Prospering Together,” proclaim the roadside banners that greeted President George W. Bush during his February visit to Mexico. U.S.-Mexican trade more than tripled between 1994 and 2000.

and debate about the United States came to an abrupt and total standstill. With very few exceptions, they would not be revived for more than a century.

This self-willed blindness would prove very damaging to Mexican society. Problems ignored are seldom solved, and as our neighbor became a global power, the “American problem” grew worse. Mexico’s blindness encouraged the country’s leaders to manipulate Mexican nationalism even as it deprived them of the knowledge they needed to fully defend Mexican interests.

The third phase in the Mexican-American relationship came with the Mexican Revolution of 1910–17. Washington was at first openly hostile toward the nationalist radicals who overthrew the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and established the PRI. But this confrontational tone was softened in 1927 with the arrival in Mexico of the new U.S. ambassador, Dwight Morrow. Although he was not a professional diplomat and spoke no Spanish, Morrow reached a broad understanding with President Plutarco Elías Calles that would largely govern the relationship between the two nations for decades to come.

More than anything, the United States wanted a stable regime on its southern flank. Throughout its history, the absence of threatening neighbors has been one of the keystones of America’s international strategy. Mexican authoritarianism was able to deliver stability, and Mexico’s leaders were willing, despite their occasional rhetorical sallies, to settle the differences that inevitably arose in pragmatic fashion. Thus, Mexico stood by Washington during World War II and the Cuban missile crisis. During the Cold War, Mexico’s intelligence services cooperated with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

In return for stability, the United States gave Mexico exceptional treatment. It scrupulously abstained from any involvement in Mexico's internal affairs. It tolerated a regime on its southern border with a variety of seemingly unpalatable features: an independent foreign policy (in which the United States was frequently depicted as a threat), an economy with heavy state involvement, and a one-party political system.

Mexico was largely spared the arrogance and interventionism that marked America's dealings with other Latin American nations—the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Chile, to name only the most outstanding cases. In 1976, when Mexico entered a long period of chronic economic crisis and currency devaluations, Washington quickly stepped in with aid. It is no exaggeration to say that these transfusions extended the life of Mexican authoritarianism.

From the beginning, the PRI had maintained its power in part by astutely manipulating Mexican nationalism. In the PRI's revolutionary ideology, all foreigners (especially the Americans) were a threat to national sovereignty, and combating this challenge required that the government monopolize Mexico's relations with the outside world. The government made its role of paladin more acceptable to Mexican elites by pursuing a foreign policy that sometimes challenged Washington and by winning the support of the Left in Latin America and elsewhere. Revolutionary Cuba, for example, wholeheartedly supported Mexican authoritarianism.

Until the 1990s, Mexicans who discussed the country's internal affairs with foreigners, or who exposed Mexican human-rights violations and electoral fraud to the outside world, were automatically classified as disloyal or treasonous and subjected to harassment, exclusion, and marginalization. Most Mexicans interested in public life accepted the PRI's vow of silence. The reasons were various—the PRI's continuing legitimacy as the vehicle of Mexican nationalism, the memory of an unjust conflict (the war of 1846–48), and ignorance about the United States and the world at large. (Mexican universities did not even begin to offer courses in international relations until the 1960s.)

The relationship between Mexico and the United States was thus governed by the interests of their respective ruling elites. Popular attitudes counted for little. Those attitudes, however, were surprisingly positive in Mexico, at least according to the U.S. government opinion surveys that provide the only available measure from the 1946–80 period. For example, a 1964 poll in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Caracas by the United States Information Agency indicated that the “greater majority” of those polled were “friendly toward the United States, as opposed to the dislike that they expressed towards the Soviet Union, Communist China, or Castro's Cuba.” Of those sampled in Mexico City, 74 percent said they viewed the United States as Mexico's “best friend.” Yet, by a similar margin, the Mexicans con-

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demned America's anticommunist foreign policy. Mexicans, in other words, had positive views of the United States even during the contentious years of the 1960s, but they did not want a formal alliance. They favored a degree of neutrality in the dispute between the world's two great superpowers. They seemed to say, "Friends, yes; allies, no."

During the past four decades, a quiet revolution has taken place in Mexico's politics and in its relationship with the world at large.

As the years passed, the government lost control over contacts with the outside world. During the 1970s, American politics and society gradually became acceptable topics for research in universities and academic centers. The number of students traveling north to pursue their studies increased dramatically. Between 1975 and 1986,

nearly 67,000 Mexican students, or about 5,500 annually, enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. As many of these young people returned home and joined the ranks of the Mexican elite, the country's perspective began to change.

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Misfortune also sped the opening of Mexico. The massive earthquake that struck Mexico City on September 19, 1985, brought an influx of aid and foreign visitors, and the guerilla wars in Central America made Mexico City a crossroads for the combatants and the many outsiders who became involved in the conflicts and their resolution. Mexican migrants, meanwhile, traveled back and forth across the Mexican-American border with increasing frequency.

The turning point came in 1985, when economic crisis forced the governments of President Miguel de la Madrid and his successor, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, to begin liberalizing the Mexican economy and opening it to the world. Within a year, Mexico had joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (predecessor of the World Trade Organization). The inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994, completed a shift that would have been impossible to imagine only a dozen years earlier. For more than a century, Mexicans had seen their country's close proximity to the United States as a great misfortune; now they saw it as an opportunity to be grasped.

The turnabout that led to NAFTA was remarkable for its speed, and even more for the scant resistance it encountered. According to a survey in 1990, before the treaty was signed, Mexicans were overwhelmingly in favor of expanded commercial relations—much more so than Americans. While 71 percent of Mexicans said they favored free trade, support was only 37 percent among Americans. Even more surprising (and a testimony to the effects of Mexico's earlier years of economic crisis), 59 percent of the Mexicans polled

stated that they were in favor of more complete integration of the two nations if it would lead to an improved quality of life.

The fruits of NAFTA spilled over into realms beyond commerce. During the 1990s, the opening to the north strongly influenced the battle for electoral democracy within Mexico. Much of official Washington came finally (though often reluctantly) to acknowledge that authoritarianism south of the border was producing perverse results. At the same time, a sense that change was in the air radically transformed perceptions of Mexico in the American news media, universities, and other institutions. The MacArthur Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy, to cite just two examples, began actively supporting Mexican human rights and prodemocracy efforts. Five hundred foreign observers (two-thirds of them from the United States) came to monitor the 1994 presidential election, and although the PRI won yet again, it became clear that the electoral abuses that had kept it in power could not continue.

The election of July 2, 2000, was a triumph not just for Fox and his National Action Party but for Mexican democracy. With this election, Mexico reaped the harvest of economic and social changes that had been underway for many years. There is a new self-confidence in Mexico today and a new openness to the world, as Mexicans increasingly compete internationally in the academic, artistic, political, and business arenas.

Along with self-confidence has come a new willingness to defend our interests. For example, President Fox has pledged to press Washington for the protection of the labor and human rights of Mexicans in the United States. At the same time, however, the Fox government is boldly pursuing common interests. In a remarkable step in March, for example, Mexico agreed to a joint U.S.-Mexican Task Force to combat the drug trade.

The year 2000 signaled the beginning of a new, fourth phase in the U.S.-Mexican relationship. Mexicans continue to see their relationship with the United States largely in a very positive light. NAFTA, for example, has won widespread acceptance. In a poll earlier this year by the Reforma Group, 56 percent of those surveyed said that Mexico was wise to sign the trade pact, while only 27 percent disagreed. Forty-three percent said that NAFTA has been good or very good for Mexico, while only 21 percent said it has been bad. Yet a MUNDOS MN/Consortio poll reveals that a certain deep-seated mistrust of the United States remains: 70 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that the United States is “trying to dominate the world.”

A more democratic and prosperous Mexico will be a more assertive Mexico. The change will revolutionize U.S.-Mexican relations in ways that are difficult to anticipate with precision. Despite their mistrust of America’s ultimate aims, Mexicans are willing to establish certain kinds of closer ties. But the U.S.-Mexican relationship will not be governed by the understanding that Calles and Morrow reached nearly 75 years ago. Washington has been accustomed to dealing with a neighbor that practiced a kind of papier-mâché nationalism, a showy façade on a hollow foundation. Now there will be less rhetoric and more substance. □