

# U.S. AMBASSADORS TO MEXICO

THE RELATIONSHIP  
THROUGH THEIR EYES

DOLIA ESTÉVEZ

 Wilson  
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MEXICO INSTITUTE

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**DOLIA ESTÉVEZ**

Author: Dolia Estévez

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To the memory of my many Mexican colleagues who have lost their lives for doing their job without government protection.

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# PROLOGUE

ANDREW SELEE

Few relationships, if any, matter more to the United States than Mexico. It is a vital trading partner, a source of heritage for millions of Americans, a neighbor in an uncertain world, and a partner on numerous global challenges. It is also a relationship fraught with historical conflict, significant economic disparities, and a persistent cultural divide. Mexicans and Americans need each other like never before, and the policies and societies in the two countries are deeply intertwined. However, reaching understanding on the key issues that affect both countries is never easy. As the two countries face the twenty-first century, getting their shared challenges right – economic integration, migration, and security –, and coordinating effectively on global challenges from climate change to economic policy will be critical to the well-being of millions of citizens in both countries.

The role of the U.S. ambassador in Mexico in moving this relationship forward has always been particularly important for setting the overall tone of engagement. Some have speculated that the U.S. ambassador is a kind of “proconsul” who sets the key agenda items in the relationship. Others have seen the ambassador as a mere representative of larger U.S. interests formulated in Washington. To date, however, we have never had a first-hand account of how the U.S. ambassadors see their own role in the relationship. In this publication, Dolia Estévez has produced an inside look at this role in the words of the former U.S. ambassadors to Mexico. It proves to be a treasure-trove of insight into not only the ambassador’s role, but also how the relationship itself has worked at key junctures from an inside perspective.

It turns out that the ambassadors have been neither proconsuls nor simple instruments of larger political designs. Each has imprinted his own personal style on the job, bringing different strengths and weaknesses to the diplomatic dance between the two governments. But each has also had to operate within the constraints of larger policy designs set by the two governments and respond to unexpected



crises. Indeed, if anything, the U.S. ambassadors' in Mexico most important role may actually be in trying to manage and give some semblance of coherence to the multiple tracks of engagement between the two countries.

Especially as the policy worlds of the two countries have become increasingly more engaged with each other, ambassadors spend much of their time managing very different strands of the relationship each with its own dynamics – relations on environmental issues, trade, security, migration, and agriculture; differing priorities from executive branch agencies, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, business leaders, and NGOs. They try to make sure the way these pieces work together fits into the broader policy framework, and they try to keep track of the multiple direct bilateral encounters as they take place.

Much of this work is routine – keeping in touch with the right people, weighing in on policies that affect the relationship, and smoothing over communications. However, there have been more than a few moments of tension, crisis, and creativity in the relationship between the two countries when the ambassador's personal skill for reconciling differing agendas and complicated personalities can prove crucial. These have ranged from the NAFTA negotiations to the peso crisis, in the 1990s, to negotiations over migration and security cooperation in this decade. Ambassadors have often played the critical role in setting the tone and the priorities in these crucial moments. In other times, too, they are almost always a crucial element – often the most important one for the U.S. government – in creating a framework for the managing the relationship well.

What emerges in this publication is a nuanced portrait of the individuals who have been tasked with serving as the key link of the U.S. government with Mexico. Dolia Estévez's effort to bring their memories and their perspectives to light helps illuminate a little known part of the political relationship between the two countries. It also chronicles a changing relationship between these countries from "distant neighbors" (in Alan Riding's now famous phrase) to "intimate strangers," who are deeply dependent on each other and yet are only still getting to know one another well enough to manage their new relationship.

# INTRODUCTION

**DOLIA ESTÉVEZ**

Throughout history, U.S. ambassadors have been a vital bridge between the United States and the host country where they serve. They are Washington's highest representative and the top interlocutor with governments and civil societies. Ambassadors are the United States' "eyes and ears". They report and interpret events on the ground and are the first line of defense for American interests abroad. During times of crisis they can expand their traditional diplomatic role to secure much needed intelligence. Even in today's real time information age, ambassadors' first hand assessments of the political and business climate in host countries are a high value commodity. Their diplomatic dispatches influence Washington's policy making process and help shape U.S. strategy toward nations.

But if American ambassadors are essential actors in bilateral relations in general, they are even more so in the unique relationship with Mexico. Because of historical, geographical, cultural and economic ties, the U.S-Mexico bilateral agenda is both intense and complex. The United States and Mexico have more treaties, agreements, letters of intent, trade, investments and immigration issues than any other two countries. Mexico also has more official and unofficial visits to the United States than any other country in the hemisphere and perhaps the world. Prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico was the largest in the world. Today, it remains among the top five largest U. S. embassies. Inside the U.S. Embassy on Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City work over 2,200 employees from more than 30 federal departments and agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the U. S. Agency for International Development (AID), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Marshals Service, Army, Navy and Coast Guard, among others. In the past six years, as the U.S. and Mexico have seen their common security more intimately linked, law enforcement and security agencies have increased their personnel and expanded their geographical presence to unprecedented levels.

With a total of 10 consulates, located in Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Matamoros (the oldest of all), Mérida, Monterrey, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Puerto Vallarta and Tijuana, Mexico ranks number one in the world in number of U.S. consulates. Additionally, 32 U.S. states have offices with permanent representatives in Mexico. The man in charge of overseeing this assemblage and massive operation is the American ambassador. He is responsible for coordinating their activities, watching out for their safety and making sure they operate within the rules of diplomatic engagement. He has the right to recall any member of his staff he deems unfit for the task or represents a potential risk to the bilateral relationship, although few ambassadors are known to have exercised this prerogative in the past decades.

U.S. diplomatic relations with Mexico date back to 1823, when President James Monroe appointed Andrew Jackson envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. After Jackson declined the job, Joel R. Poinsett became the first envoy to Mexico in 1825. More than twenty envoys and *chargé d' affaires* served in Mexico in the subsequent decades, which were marked by numerous hostilities, the Mexican-American war and the severing of diplomatic relations. In 1898, the rank of the American chief of mission to Mexico was elevated from envoy to ambassador. Powell Clayton thus became the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

Mexico has never been an easy place to be U.S. ambassador. Poinsett, who was recalled at the request of the Mexican government in 1829, and Henry Lane Wilson, who served during the 1910 Revolution, are considered to be the most hated U.S. ambassadors of all time. Mexicans can still vividly recall past American interventions and the loss of half of their territory to the United States. The power and proximity of the United States make it a natural place to place blame – whether fairly or unfairly – for problems. A notable example of this occurred at the height of the Cold War, when the Mexican presidents played the anti-American and pro-Cuban card to try to win domestic leftists' support and prevent the pro-Communist opposition from trying to destabilize their governments.

In the United States, ambassadors are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The selection of the ambassador to Mexico is a particularly complex and sensitive decision. The many challenges and sensitivities of the relationship require an envoy who is both diplomatically astute and politically savvy. Knowledge of Mexican culture and the Spanish language are a bonus. Deciding between career members of the Foreign Service or political appointees becomes secondary to more pressing considerations. Because of the influence that Mexico and Mexicans can have on the domestic debate and policies, the process of selecting an ambassador to Mexico, perhaps more than to any other country, brings into play competing domestic and foreign policy priorities of a political, economic, electoral and ethnic nature.

This is clearly evident over the past 34 years when the characteristics of the individual appointed ambassador often coincide with the objectives of the era. At a time when Washington was desperate for Mexico to increase its oil output due to the instability in the Middle East and the rise of anti-American sentiment in Iran, President James Carter chose Patrick J. Lucey, the governor of Wisconsin, to try to please Mexican president José López Portillo who had requested a “non-hyphenated American” for ambassador; Carter’s second envoy was Julian Nava, a little-known academic from California who was named to try to court the Latino vote in Carter’s unsuccessful reelection bid; in the midst of the American intervention into Central America, Ronald Reagan chose former actor John A. Gavin, an old acquaintance from his Hollywood days who had the virtue of being able to deliver in fluent Spanish Washington’s message to the mostly anti-American Mexican Foreign Ministry; later on, interested in reducing tensions and changing the focus from Central America to economic issues, Reagan appointed Charles J. Pilliod Jr., a businessman from Ohio, with no diplomatic background but with a discreet and conciliatory demeanor; the rise to power of “reform-minded Harvard trained president” Carlos Salinas de Gortari was seen as a golden opportunity for Mexico to leave behind its nationalist outlook and embrace globalization which led President George H. W. Bush to nominate Ambassador John D. Negroponte, an astute career diplomat and seasoned Cold War warrior who could help bring the negotiations of the landmark North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into conclusion; anticipating an uphill war with a highly protectionist Congress to ratify NAFTA, President William Clinton turned to James R. Jones, a skilled politician and consensus builder close to Congress, where he had served in the House of Representatives; sensing the end of 71 years of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and fearing social unrest, Clinton then chose as his second envoy Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow, a capable career foreign service officer who could witness from the sidelines the historic end of the PRI’s control of the presidency; in recognition of the first president from the National Action Party (PAN), a party ideologically closer to the Republican Party than the PRI, President George W. Bush selected Antonio O. Garza, a longtime Texas political ally, friend and confidant; finally, Barack Obama accepted his influential secretary of state’s suggestion to nominate Carlos Pascual, a known specialist on security issues, with proven experience for managing and coordinating the vast network of agencies that were beginning to increase their role in Mexico’s war on drugs.

## **WHAT HAS CHANGED**

From World War II until 1990, U.S. foreign policy was framed as an East-West conflict. Everything was viewed through that lens. Foreign policy toward the region was

driven by the need to contain communism and keep Mexico and Latin America far away from the Soviet Union's orbit of influence. A stable and anti-communist Mexico was a key U.S. geopolitical goal. During the 71 years of the PRI reign, there was a tacit agreement to ignore corruption, human rights violations and vote fraud because it was believed that a stable Mexico on the southern border was a more important goal. U.S.-Mexico relations have evolved and grown more mature since the days of the Cold War. While there is still concern about preserving internal stability, the end of the proxy wars in Central America shifted the policy focus and broadened the role of ambassadors. As Mexico began a path of free-market economic reforms and of opening up to the world economically, first by joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and then by negotiating NAFTA, and as Mexico became more democratic with less centralized political power, U.S. ambassadors no longer limited their dialogue to the executive branch. They became increasingly engaged with opposition figures, civil society, the business community, and the media. Respect for human rights, fair elections and the rule of law moved to the forefront of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. In the 1990s, far from lamenting the end of the PRI, an era that once served U.S. geopolitical interests in the region well, ambassadors encouraged Mexico to allow political participation, open up its political system and warned governments against the use of force to suppress opposition forces.

The relationship has become more pragmatic and tolerant. Mexican governments—particularly under the PAN—increasingly look to the U.S. for help. The Mérida Initiative, a 1.4 billion dollar counternarcotics assistance package for Mexico, marked a turning point. For the first time, the U.S. and Mexico recognized that they share common problems and thus share the responsibility and the obligation to tackle them jointly.

The change in attitude toward the United States has been most noticeable at the government level, which is less reluctant to accept the type of American assistance that not long ago would have been considered an infringement on national sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction. It remains to be seen if the new PRI administration of Enrique Peña Nieto will continue the same level of security cooperation with the United States.

## **WHAT REMAINS THE SAME**

Despite these significant changes, some habits and attitudes remain the same. There is still a strong sense of suspicion about U.S. intentions. Public opinion, for instance, continues to oppose opening up the declining oil industry to foreign investment due to fears of losing an asset closely associated to Mexico's nationalist history. A hostile

or inappropriate statement by a U.S. politician is often taken as tantamount to official policy. Government officials still feel compelled to respond to remarks made in the U.S. Congress or stories in the U.S. press that they consider unfair and meddling. Bias in the way Mexicans see Americans and vice versa has changed little. Some public discourse does not differ much from a century ago when Mexico accused Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson of internal interference and as a result broke relations with Washington. Mexican presidents continue to attack the U.S. ambassador for political expediency.

My extensive journalistic coverage of U.S.-Mexico relations over two decades, from the NAFTA negotiations to the drug wars, discussions with key actors on both sides of the border and reading thousands of pages of U.S. diplomatic cables declassified under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), provoked my interest in interviewing all living former ambassadors to Mexico about their own experiences. I was curious to hear their side of the story. But, the event that finally impelled me to start the project was the political storm caused by leaked U.S. Embassy confidential diplomatic cables which led to the American Ambassador's abrupt resignation in 2011. This was a dramatic reminder that the U.S. ambassadorship to Mexico can still be a source of contention.

Due to the resentment that has long characterized U.S.-Mexico relations, the American envoy is by definition a polemical and mistrusted figure. He is the closest and most direct target on which to vent 200 years of historical frustration. Even his presence can exacerbate anti-American sentiments and nourish popular conspiratorial theories of real or perceived intervention threats. Over the past decades, his arrival in Mexico, with few exceptions, has been preceded by a public drama or "baptism of fire," as one former ambassador politely called the barrage of media attacks new ambassadors are subjected to. Paradoxically, all have been granted agrément and five out of nine living former ambassadors have been awarded the Order of the Águila Azteca, Mexico's highest decoration given to a foreigner. Ultimately, an ambassador's success or failure is measured by the effectiveness with which he represents the United States and gains the trust of the host nation.

## **THIS VOLUME**

This volume brings together exclusive one-on-one in-depth interviews with eight former living U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico: Patrick J. Lucey (1977-1979); Julian Nava (1980-1981); John A. Gavin (1981-1986); John D. Negroponte (1989-1993); James R. Jones (1993-1997); Jeffrey Davidow (1998-2002); Antonio O. Garza (2002-2009)

and Carlos Pascual (2009-2011). They served under three Democratic and three Republican presidents. I was unable to interview Charles J. Pilliod (1986-1989). His wife informed me in an email that he is “experiencing many health issues”. The volume includes a summary describing his tenure in Mexico. This collection of interviews constitutes the centerpiece of this volume. It is therefore not an academic book. Nor is it an attempt to assess the ambassadors’ performances or analyze U.S. foreign policy toward Mexico. It is rather an original work of journalism that tells the story of U.S.-Mexico relations over a 34 year period –1977-2011– from the unique perspective of these key actors that helped shape and influence the relationship. It is a forum to hear their voices and see Mexico through their eyes. The interviews offer insightful and colorful hard-to come-by insider anecdotes of some of the events that shaped U.S.-Mexican relations. They reveal confidential conversations about this often secretive and enigmatic relationship.

Their testimonies show that the influence that ambassadors exerted in Washington’s decision making process and the political latitude they had, were determined by their personal relationship with the U.S. president, the U.S. president’s interest in Mexico, the political context of the time, and the ambassadors’ personality and political weight. They suggest that the White House pays more attention to Mexico in times of crisis (the Zapatista revolt, political assassinations and the peso crisis of 1994) or opportunities (the discovery of huge oil reserves and the NAFTA negotiations). And they confirm that Mexico is not an easy place to be U.S. ambassador. In fact, all of them agreed that it was one of the most, if not the most, challenging post of their careers. A high profile performance or being too vocal is not wise, but neither is being low key or silent. Some say they tried to demystify the Mexican public perception that U.S. ambassadors are “proconsuls” sent to dictate policy and impose the U.S. agenda.

I conducted the interviews over a period of nine months, from April 2011 to January 2012, in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, La Jolla, Washington, D.C., and Mexico City. With each ambassador I addressed specific issues, events, and individuals that marked his term both in Mexico and the United States. Some spoke more candidly and with better recollection of the past than others. Each interview represents a chapter, which includes an introduction explaining the political context in which they served, a brief biography, and key bilateral events that took place during their tenure. U.S. diplomatic dispatches I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act over the past 15 years are used in the footnotes. The volume also offers a chronological list of all U.S. envoys to Mexico since 1823 to the present.



**PATRICK J. LUCEY**



**PATRICK J. LUCEY** was born on March 21, 1918 in La Crosse, Wisconsin. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he served in the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1949. He was Democratic Party Chairman and became a key supporter of John F. Kennedy's presidential run in 1960. He was elected Governor of Wisconsin in 1971, reelected in 1974 and served until 1977, when he resigned to become Ambassador to Mexico. He was appointed Ambassador to Mexico by President Jimmy Carter on May 26, 1977 and presented his credentials on July 19, 1977. He resigned on October 31, 1979 to return to the United States and support Senator Edward M. Kennedy's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination against Carter. Lucey was awarded the Order of the Aguila Azteca, Mexico's highest honor granted to a foreign national.

During Lucey's 27-month mission as ambassador, Mexico signed a 6-year letter of intent with six American companies to sell gas; Carter paid a state visit to Mexico; Mexico broke diplomatic relations with Nicaragua; Fidel Castro was welcomed by López Portillo in Cozumel; and the Shah of Iran was given a six-month visa to live in exile in Mexico, but denied reentry when he tried to return from medical treatment in Texas. In his 1979 State of the Union address, López Portillo announced that Mexico's gas and oil reserves had increased 12.5 % over the past 8 months. The same month, López Portillo visited Washington for talks on energy and immigration.

# I / PATRICK J. LUCEY

1977-1979

Patrick Joseph Lucey became ambassador to Mexico in July 1977 soon after huge oil discoveries turned Mexico into a potential world oil power. With the political instability of the Middle East and the rise of an anti-American clerical fanatic movement in Iran, Mexico's new oil wealth generated great strategic interest in the United States. A secret memorandum to President Jimmy Carter by the National Security Council said, "These new discoveries...offer the United States an important new source of oil with reduced vulnerability to political and military developments beyond the hemisphere."<sup>1</sup> New administrations were being inaugurated simultaneously in both countries. President José López Portillo<sup>2</sup> took office in December 1976, President Carter in January 1977. With little foreign policy experience, President Carter and his national security and foreign policy teams were ambivalent about how to approach a complicated relationship such as Mexico's. Carter, who spoke Spanish and had visited Mexico several times, was determined to improve and deepen his administration's ties with Mexico. He honored López Portillo with the first state visit to the White House and pleased him by sending as ambassador a "non-hyphenated American" politician, as López Portillo had reportedly requested.

In 1978, with the purpose of developing a comprehensive approach toward Mexico, the White House ordered the most ambitious secret review ever of United States policy toward Mexico.<sup>3</sup> With the participation of 14 federal agencies and up to 48 officials, the goal was to develop a "centralized and coordinated" focus on the main problems affecting the United States' relations with Mexico. The consensus reached was that rapid development of Mexico's oil reserves might desta-

<sup>1</sup> Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41, Review of the U.S. Policies Toward Mexico, November 29, 1978, was partially declassified by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve on June 19, 2009 in response to a FOIA request by the author. U.S. Interests and Key Issues, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> President of Mexico, 1976-1982; died in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41, *Ibid.*

bilize the country, and it was far more important to avoid that outcome than to reduce dependence or raise world production.<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Lucey was largely left out of these closed doors deliberations, which took place in 1978 and 1979 in Washington, D.C. The Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41 issued a set of recommendations that became the basis for United States policy toward Mexico during the remainder of Carter's one-term Presidency. Washington was to pursue a relationship with Mexico based on respect and high-level consultations. Accordingly, Carter named a special coordinator for Mexican affairs in the State Department,<sup>5</sup> a position that had little or no practical relevance.

But despite Washington's good intentions, disagreements on gas prices and López Portillo's refusal to retake the Shah of Iran in exile in 1979 generated tensions that the Carter administration was unable to handle. By the end of the administration, not only had the relationship not improved, it had deteriorated, with Mexico's public rhetoric becoming increasingly radical. Differences in diplomatic style, whereby Mexico adopted a strongly nationalistic position in dealing with the United States, further contributed to the decline of the relationship. López Portillo, like most of his predecessors, played the anti-American and pro-Cuban cards to try to win domestic leftists' support and prevent the pro-Communist opposition from trying to destabilize his government. When the Carter Administration refused to make concessions on gas prices, López Portillo passionately defended Mexico's energy resources from what he portrayed as an American conspiracy to grab Mexico's "patrimony" by force if necessary. In his two-volume memoir,<sup>6</sup> he claimed that Carter told him with no witness present "not to fear armed invasions or acts of reprisals" by the United States.<sup>7</sup> López Portillo wrote that in private meetings and in press interviews for which there are no records, Lucey called the White House policy on Mexico "schizophrenic" and "paranoid."<sup>8</sup> He said that Lucey told him that Carter "feared (López Portillo) reverently" as someone "larger than his own natural size." The Mexican president also claimed that Lucey resigned in disagreements with White House Mexican policy.<sup>9</sup>

In a two-hour interview, Lucey took issue with López Portillo's historical account as well as the comments and views attributed to him by López Portillo. At 93 years of age, Governor Lucey, as he is known in Wisconsin, where he served two terms before his Mexican assignment, has a clear recollection of the events that

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Pastor and Jorge Catañeda, *Limits to Friendship, the United States and Mexico* (Vintage Books, 1989), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Krueger, Ambassador at Large and Coordinator of Mexican Affairs, 1979-1981.

<sup>6</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 811.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 689.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 815.

made the strongest impression on him during the 27 months he served as U.S. ambassador to Mexico. His recollections of other issues, mainly related to United States policy toward Mexico, are less sharp. This is partly due to his age, but more because he was not always part of the high-level policymaking process and discussions that took place in Washington.

He and his wife, Jean, moved to Milwaukee Catholic House in 2003, after her memory began to fail. Still active in Wisconsin politics, Ambassador Lucey spends part of his days reading, in front of the computer and on the phone keeping up with local politics in his home office where the interview took place. Most of his books, notes, pictures and memorabilia of his long political career, including those related to his mission in Mexico, are stored in a separate location. A glossy Mexican art book is the only object present that evokes Mexico. When I visited him on April 19, 2011, Ambassador Lucey was reading *True Compass*, the late Senator Kennedy's memoirs.

\* \* \*

*When did President Carter ask you to be his ambassador to Mexico?*

In the spring of 1977, I got a call from Jimmy Carter. He and I had served as governors together and he couldn't run for re-election, so he ran for president.

*What did you tell him?*

My first reaction was to say, "I can't believe that you want me to give up an active governorship to become an ambassador"—I had been re-elected. He said, "I know what governors do, and I know what I need for you to do in Mexico is more important." So I said, "Well, let me think about it." I thought about it for several days. I hadn't been too close to Carter. Jimmy and I were never very close, but after all, he was the president, and when the president of the United States asks you to do something, you should think twice about it before you say no. So finally I called Hamilton Jordan<sup>10</sup> from Georgia—this is about seven days after I got the call from the president—and I said, "Ham, I decided to accept Jimmy Carter's offer, but it cannot become public yet." He said, "Well then let's just keep it between us, and don't call the State Department, because they leak like a sieve."

*Why keep it quiet?*

I was in the middle of getting a major reform through in terms of our judicial system here in Wisconsin. This is a project that I started in 1971 when I first be-

<sup>10</sup> Carter's Chief of Staff, 1977 to 1980; died in 2008.

come governor, but it was a complicated project. The chief justice of the Supreme Court asked me to do it. He and I had been friends for many, many years. I was going to have it in the ballot in April of 1977; it was shortly before that that I got the call from Jimmy Carter. So I certainly did not want it to be known that I was going to be going to Mexico. The fact is that we were in the process in the legislature of passing the budget, and I felt that if I left for Mexico and the budget hadn't been passed that it might be very hard to get it through with the recommendations that I made to the legislature. So I stayed in Wisconsin until I was able to sign the budget. He called me in April and I didn't go down there until July.

*Why did President Carter select you?*

I don't know. I never really asked him, but I assume that he knew as a Democratic governor that I was very active in the Governors Association. I was chairman of the Democratic Governors. I never pinned Jimmy down as to just why he singled me out among the other governors around the country.

*Did you have a Mexican or Latin American background?*

Well, in fact, before I went to Mexico, I don't think Carter knew that I had spent 33 months in Puerto Rico during World War II. I don't think he even knew that I had two years of high school Spanish. I had a good deal of interest in Latin America—in fact, as governor we had a sister state relationship with Nicaragua, and I made a couple of trips down there.

*Do you know if López Portillo and Carter, in their meeting in February 1977 in the White House, talked about who to name as ambassador?*

Santiago Roel was the Foreign Minister<sup>11</sup> for most of the time I was there, and he and I had a very good relationship. He was a lawyer from Monterrey and he really didn't have a lot of foreign policy background. He and President López Portillo had been to the White House for the state visit, and they told Carter that they did not want a career diplomat, they did not want a hyphenated American, they wanted a true American and they wanted a politician. Well, that pretty well defined me. Once, in Mexico, I was talking to Roel and he said to me, "We chose you." And I said, "I don't know how you can say that—you didn't know me when I got here." "That's all right. We picked you." He told me the story about how they spelled out for Carter the definition of what they wanted. And of course, I filled

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<sup>11</sup> Foreign Minister, 1976 to 1978; died in 2001.

that definition pretty well.<sup>12</sup> I suppose out of that conversation Carter decided to call me and ask me if I would do it.

*Were the Mexicans pleased that President Carter had listened to them?*

Well, after I was in Mexico for a while, the Foreign Minister and I became buddy-buddies and I saw an awful lot of him. In fact, one time, on a Friday, I was in his office and I said, “Santiago, this is ridiculous. I have been in your office five times, every day this week, and there are 65 ambassadors here in Mexico City. Surely you have an undersecretary or an assistant or something, somebody that could be assigned to look after the smaller details that develop in the relationship between the United States and Mexico.” He said, “Maintaining good relations with the United States is 80 percent of my job. There is no way that I can delegate any part of that. Don’t be apologetic about it if there is a necessity to come and see me five days in a row.”

*Did Carter give you any particular instructions before leaving for Mexico?*

I don’t think so. I don’t recall any conversation with him along those lines. In fact, when I was sworn in, I think Vice President Mondale was the one who administered the oath to me.

*What did you want to accomplish in Mexico as an ambassador?*

I did not have an in-depth program; I went down there at Carter’s insistence. Mexico had just come to realize that with the deeper oil drilling that they could do, they were becoming a major exporter of petroleum, and this gave them a new self-image. They wanted the kind of ambassador that I was, rather than just a routine career diplomat.

*Did you have direct access to President Carter on issues that had to do with Mexico?*

Not very much. I could have, (but) I worked very closely with Cy Vance<sup>13</sup> and Warren Christopher.<sup>14</sup>

*How often did you meet with López Portillo?*

I saw him whenever I wanted to, usually at Los Pinos. Italia<sup>15</sup> was his translator. She was a little girl, and she would sit between us, and he would speak, of course,

<sup>12</sup> Lucey is a Roman Catholic, of Irish descent.

<sup>13</sup> Carter’s Secretary of State, 1977 to 1980; died in 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Carter’s Deputy Secretary of State, 1977 to 1981; died in 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Italia Morayta.

in Spanish, and I in English,<sup>16</sup> and she would do instant translation and in no time at all you felt like you were sitting there both speaking the same language. She was excellent. My bilingual personnel told me that she didn't cheat. She did a perfect job of translating what I said and what he said. One time she said, "How is your Spanish coming?" I said, "Muy mal." She said, "That's good." "What do you mean good?" I found it embarrassing. She said, "Oh no, if your Spanish got really good, I'd be out of a job."

*Is it fair to say that you could meet President López Portillo whenever you needed or wanted?*

Yes, I certainly can't recall an instance in which I was denied.

*What kind of issues would make you request a meeting with him?*

I don't remember. I went over to Los Pinos several times. I was never denied access to the president or to Los Pinos.

*When you requested a meeting with López Portillo, was it by your initiative or at Washington's request?*

I think it was usually my initiative.

*López Portillo writes in his memoirs that you told him that the White House's policies toward Mexico were "schizophrenic"<sup>17</sup> and that Carter was intimidated by López Portillo's aura of intellectual superiority. Do you recall having had those conversations?*

I can't imagine having that kind of conversation because that certainly is not the role of an ambassador, to downgrade your president.

*He writes that you told the press that Carter feared López Portillo as "someone larger than him" and that this contributed to the "paranoia" inside the White House toward Mexico.<sup>18</sup> Did you?*

It does not ring a bell. When I was leaving Mexico, López Portillo gave me the highest dignity that they would confer to a non-Mexican, the Order of the Águila Azteca. Maybe they give it to a lot of American ambassadors.

*During the time you were in Mexico, who did you deal with in Washington?*

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<sup>16</sup> It was said that Lucey's inability to speak Spanish "served to isolate him from Mexicans who did not know English." Richard D. Lyons, *The New York Times*, August 26, 1980, p. B6.

<sup>17</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 689.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 815.

Mostly with Cyrus Vance. Cy and I had a very good relationship, and his resignation as secretary of state had to do with Carter's efforts to rescue the diplomats that were being held in Tehran—and of course it was a disaster. Cy put the president on notice that he disapproved of this rescue attempt and would resign because of that, and whether the effort succeeded or failed, his resignation would take effect after the event. He did not want to resign during the matter.

*What do you remember about Carter's state visit to Mexico in February 1979?*

I called the White House and I said that the tradition in Mexico is that when a head of state from another country comes here, the Mexicans have a state dinner in his honor, but they expect us to immediately reciprocate by having a state dinner in honor of the Mexican president. And whoever I talked to in the White House—it wasn't Carter—informed me that they were trying to economize, and while they would accept the hospitality of the Mexicans, they would not reciprocate. I said, "In that case, I, as ambassador, will hold a dinner honoring both presidents, and that would be the U.S. response to the state dinner."

The other thing I told them was that the Mexicans expect that when you come here that we had some sort of an event that is bicultural, and so whoever I was dealing with in Washington suggested that a Tex-Mex barbecue would be bicultural. Well, it turned out that the Mexicans dislike Texas. They dislike that Texas was part of Mexico and they divorced themselves from Mexico and it was not part of the Mexican-American War; it was an independent action by Texas. And for that reason Texas is not held in high regard in Mexico.

*So what happened?*

What we did was to have Leonard Bernstein, the orchestra director from New York, travel down to Mexico for the state visit. Mrs. López Portillo, who was a concert pianist, had also put together an orchestra in Mexico, drawing heavily from students from New York's prestigious Julliard Music School. So we arranged for Bernstein to come from New York and direct her symphony orchestra. It became a huge success, and we had the whole ambassadorial corps and all the important people from the Mexican government. This was in Bellas Artes. We had the dinner party at the residence for the two presidents, but at the head table we also had Bernstein and his daughter, and Jean and I.

*In his memoirs, López Portillo, who was known to be a classical music fan, says that Carter was bothered by his conversation on music, including tangos, with Bernstein. Did Carter complain about feeling left out?*



I don't recall. What happened is that at the head table, Bernstein would sing Spanish love songs and in most instances President López Portillo knew the same songs and would join right in with him. The president and Bernstein did this together, and I had the feeling that it bothered Mrs. Carter that this was something that Jimmy couldn't really be part of.

*López Portillo also wrote in his memoirs that at the last minute, Carter changed his speech at the dinner offered by the United States, and that Alan Riding<sup>19</sup> helped draft the new version.<sup>20</sup> Do you remember why?*

I don't recall Carter changing his speech. Alan Riding would have been fired by *The New York Times*.

*What people remember most about Carter's state visit to Mexico were his remarks about getting Montezuma's revenge in a previous trip to Mexico.*

Very unfortunate that he did that, because Mexico depends so much on tourism for its economy and the last thing they needed was for the president of the United States to talk about Montezuma's revenge.

*What were the issues the United States was most concerned with during the state visit?*

I think that Mexico was very excited about the fact that with the deeper drilling they were a major exporter of petroleum, and their ability to ship petroleum and natural gas to the United States was a matter of great pride to them.

*Do you remember López Portillo's visit to D.C. in September 1979?*

I don't recall much of that meeting.

*There were reports at the time that the United States was pressuring Mexico to agree to sell natural gas at a low price and that the United States was pushing other issues, such as tomato exports and illegal immigration, to pressure Mexico.*

I don't recall. It was all very positive. I don't think there was any conflict between Mexico and the United States on the issue. They were delighted to sell and we were delighted to buy it.

*When you were in Mexico, how did you feel about Mexico's traditional expressions of anti-Americanism?*

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<sup>19</sup> *The New York Times* correspondent in Mexico, author of *Distant Neighbors* (Vintage, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 814.

Well, for instance, we talked about the Mexican War. In the Mexican school-books, it's not called the Mexican War; it's called the "unfair war." There were cadets in Chapultepec castle, and they jumped to their death rather than being captured by the Americans. And when people asked the Americans why they pursued the war all the way to Mexico City, they said they had to go that far to find someone that could sign a peace treaty. The basis for the war seems sort of weak. This fellow, we claimed that he invaded the United States. There is some question whether he crossed into the United States or not, but on that basis, which was a pretty slim basis, we declared war on Mexico. The result was that we ended up taking half of their territory, and when we included California, we took some of their best territory.

*Did you personally experience that resentment?*

The foreign minister and I talked about it. I don't think that there was a grudge after all those years. It was the "unfair war" and he told me about these cadets that jumped off the cliff.

*Did you sense a lack of trust?*

That was ancient history as far as they were concerned, I think. I thought we had a very good and very friendly relation with Mexico.

*Was Carter upset with López Portillo's refusal to take the Shah of Iran back in 1979?*

I remember that vaguely. I don't think it became a big issue, but it is true...

*In his memoirs, López Portillo writes that when Vice President Mondale visited Mexico,<sup>21</sup> he asked López Portillo to tell Cuba that the United States would consider it "very grave" if Cuba were to increase its presence in Angola. Did the United States rely on Mexico to send messages to Cuba when you were ambassador?*

I don't recall. What I do recall is that the foreign minister sent for me one day and I came over and he said, "The president and I are going to China<sup>22</sup> and they are going to have a state dinner for us, we are meeting with the president of China," and so forth, "And I just wonder if there is any message that we might carry to the Chinese from the United States." So I said, "Let me check on that." And I called Washington and I talked to Zbigniew Brzezinski.<sup>23</sup> He said, "Gosh, our relationship with China is so sensitive right now that the last thing we need is to have the Mexicans get involved

<sup>21</sup> January 21, 1978, Vice President Mondale traveled to Mexico for meetings with López Portillo.

<sup>22</sup> López Portillo traveled to China, Japan and the Philippines in October 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Carter's National Security Advisor, 1977-1981.

in our relationship with China.” I said, “Well, that would not be a very good message for me to carry back to the foreign minister.” He said, “No, you are right. You tell the foreign minister that there just isn’t time to draft an appropriate statement. But when he gets back from China, I will fly down and he can give me a debriefing on his trip to China.” So I reported that to Santiago Roel, and he thought that was quite acceptable. And sure enough, when they got back from China, Brzezinski flew down and we went up to the 20<sup>th</sup> floor of the Foreign Office and had a very nice de-briefing from the foreign minister about the trip to China.

*López Portillo says that he sent Roel to Cuba to deliver Mondale’s message to Castro.*<sup>24</sup>

No, I don’t remember that part. I met with Mondale in Washington and he said, “I was up in Canada and they insisted that I make a speech,” and he said, “I did that. We really haven’t had anything strong going on with Canada, so it was hard to put together any kind of speech,” but he said, “Now I’m coming to Mexico, and we really have a lot going on with Mexico and would welcome the chance to make a speech when I’m down there.” “That’s very easy to handle, and I’ll set up a luncheon at the Presidente Hotel and we will have top people from the Mexican government and the diplomatic corps and you will have a chance to make a speech.” I said, “As far as arranging your trip, the president of Israel had just been here and the Israeli ambassador and I are very good friends. I’ll get from him a copy of the notes that he prepared to bring his president. I’m sure there would be some ideas that would be useful to us.” And he said, “That seems very appropriate, because I understand that the president of Israel has a nothing job too.” Mondale considered the vice presidency as a sort of a nothing job.

*Were Mexico’s close ties to the Sandinistas an issue?*

I was not aware of any conflict around Central America.

*During your time in Mexico, there were a number of visits by high-level officials, from Mondale to Vance. Did you always participate in those meetings?*

Yes, pretty much. In terms of staffing of the American Embassy in Mexico, it is the largest staff in any embassy in the world. We did not have any military in Mexico. If you counted the military, then that wouldn’t be true, but except for the military we had the largest staff at the American Embassy in Mexico City that we had in any place in the world. Of the federal employees that reported to me, more were from the Department of Agriculture than from the Department of State.

<sup>24</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 685.

*Why?*

Because we had so many relationships with Mexico involving agriculture. For instance, there was an insect that could be very damaging to livestock, and we had learned to deal with that insect in the United States, but Mexico was really troubled by it. So I talked to our people at the Department of Agriculture in Washington and brought the Mexicans the solution to the problem.

*Were you in touch with non-government groups in Mexico?*

There were 50,000 Americans living in Mexico City, and I think I disappointed them, because I think they thought that the ambassador should sort of be their unofficial mayor and my feeling was that I needed as much time as possible to deal with the Mexican government. I probably did not socialize with the American community as much they would like—especially the business community.

*Where you part of the comprehensive policy review by the Carter Administration that led to the 1978 Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41: Review of U.S. Policies Toward Mexico?*

I don't recall much.

*Did you take part in a high-level meeting with Carter in May 1977 in the White House where doubts were raised about a bracero program<sup>25</sup> and where there were second thoughts about a proposal to give some sort of amnesty to the 6-8 million Mexican illegals?*

I don't recall. I remember a bracero program but I don't remember that there were doubts...

*The Departments of Agriculture and Justice were pushing the idea of a bracero-type program that ended up being rejected by the White House. Do you know why?*

I remember the bracero program, but I don't remember that the Carter people had rejected it.

*Was Mexico a high priority in the United States foreign policy agenda of the time?*

I think so. I don't think I would have been asked to resign a governorship if they didn't put high priority on it. I think it was pretty important. The state visit by Carter was a big event, and Cy Vance was down there at least two or three times while I was ambassador.

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<sup>25</sup> U.S.-Mexico diplomatic agreements for the importation of temporary contract workers from Mexico to the United States, 1942-1967.

*Why was Mexico a high priority?*

I think oil and natural gas. I think that they felt Mexico was going through a sort of maturing process, and I think Cy Vance had a real feel for that and was doing everything he could to be helpful. The feeling was that it was next door after all, and it was not from the Middle East. This was deemed very important in our overall security and our need for imported energy.

*They saw the potential of Mexico becoming a strategic energy reserve for the United States when the Middle East was so unstable and so far away?*

I think so. I think that was true.

*Did the White House believe that there was a connection between national security and Mexico's internal stability?*

It was true, but I don't recall an exact instance where Carter and I talked about it. I think they felt it was important to have a prosperous and peaceful Mexico in terms of our security.

*Were there conversations in which the United States shared these interests with the Mexican government?*

I wish I could say I recall such conversations but I can't.

*Who made United States foreign policy toward Mexico back then?*

I think Cy Vance had a lot to do with it.

*What about Brzezinski?*

I did not see as much of him as I did Cy Vance.

*Robert Pastor?*<sup>26</sup>

I remember Bob Pastor.

*Did you deal with him?*

I did. I wouldn't have thought of him if you did not mention him but he and I were good buddies. I had contact with him.

*Was there any concern with the PRI being in power for so long?*

Not really. I think it was accepted at that point.

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<sup>26</sup> Latin America Advisor at the NSC, 1977-1981.

*Do you know why López Portillo fired Roel in May 1979 on the eve of Fidel Castro's visit to Cozumel?*

Roel went down to the border, and what he was doing down there I never knew. But he was down there for quite a while, and when he came back he was dispensed, and I never could figure out why he was dismissed. After, he would sit around at his home with this bathrobe and would always tell me, "I still don't understand why my best friend fired me." When I was no longer ambassador, I visited him and he was still moping around wasting his life. I finally told him to stop it and get back to practicing law. Later on he told me, "You saved my life."

*Did you get along with Jorge Castañeda de la Rosa<sup>27</sup>, Roel's successor?*

We got along fine, but he was a different type. His wife was Russian. I think he was much more left-leaning than Santiago was. I don't recall any conflict we had but I didn't feel as comfortable with him as I did with Santiago. His son,<sup>28</sup> by the way, was a bright fellow. I met him. We got along pretty well. I link him with Bob Pastor; they were good buddies.

*López Portillo says in his memoirs that you resigned around disagreements with the White House's policies toward Mexico.*

I don't think so.

*When did you start thinking about resigning as ambassador?*

I think it had to do with Ted Kennedy's plans to run for president. When it looked like there was a choice between Ted Kennedy and Carter for president, I certainly thought that Kennedy would be a better choice.

*Where you disappointed with Carter?*

Yeah, I was as disappointed at his handling of the Iran issue as Cy Vance was. Cy resigned the post. I thought it showed a lack of sound judgment on the part of Carter. Carter is a better ex-president than he was president.

*Did you see López Portillo after he left office?*

Yes. I remember having a meeting with him where we did not have Italia, and where I was trying to speak some broken Spanish and he was trying to speak some broken English and I marveled how well we could communicate with each other.

<sup>27</sup> Foreign Minister of Mexico, 1979-1982; died in 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Jorge G. Castañeda, Foreign Minister of Mexico, 2001-2003.

I don't remember what the occasion was. I had a very positive impression of him. After he left office he divorced.

*Did you have the opportunity to meet Julian Nava, your successor?*

I think at that point, despite what the president of Mexico had said about a non-hyphenated American, Carter really felt he had to appoint someone with Mexican connections. A Latino.

*And John Gavin?*

He had been in the movies. I ran into Santiago Roel and he said, "What's wrong with Washington? They are sending us a movie actor for ambassador." "We have a movie actor for president. What do you expect?" I said.

*Do you consider your Mexican experience a special part of your long life?*

Yeah, I do, and I'm glad I did it. I was ready to run for third term as governor. I even had some money in the bank for a campaign, but one of the things that persuaded me to accept Carter's offer was that I had four or five major projects when I became governor, and I had achieved all of those. And if I had announced for a third term and a smart reporter had said, "Well, now what's your program for the next 4 years?" I would not have had much to offer.

*Did you have mixed feelings about leaving Mexico?*

Yes, I had mixed feelings. My relationship with this fellow who replaced Roel, Jorge Castañeda de la Rosa—it wasn't the way it had been with Roel. Santiago and I sort of became buddies. I remember one time I said as joke that I was wondering if I should go along with Carter in this business of giving away the Panama Canal. Obviously I was not going to argue with the president in giving away the Panama Canal. "The trouble is that if we give away the Panama Canal then you would want all your land back." Roel said, "We would take California." I said, "You can't have California unless you take Texas." He said, "No deal."

*What do you think was your biggest accomplishment in Mexico?*

Well, I think I did a lot in making a success of the state visit by Carter. They needed me on that. The refusal to have a state dinner, their idea of what is bicultural, I think I did a lot to make that trip a success. It would have been kind of a disgrace otherwise.

*Did you enjoy your assignment in Mexico?*

Yes, I did. If someone would ask me if I'd rather be ambassador than governor, I'd say I rather be governor. But I'd rather be both than either one.



**JULIAN NAVA**



**JULIAN NAVA** was born June 19, 1927 in Los Angeles, California. The son of poor Mexican immigrants from Zacatecas, Nava majored in history at Pomona College and received a doctorate degree from Harvard University in 1955. In 1967, he became the first Mexican-American to serve on the Los Angeles School Board. He taught history at California State University for 22 years. Nava presented credentials as ambassador to Mexico on May 7, 1980 and terminated his mission on April 3, 1981.

In the year Nava was ambassador, Iraq and Iran went to war, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in a landslide, the American hostages in Iran were released the day after Reagan's inauguration, Mexico declined to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the United States accepted Mexico's price offer for gas exports, and governors from border states in Mexico and the United States met for the first time in Ciudad Juárez.

## 2 / JULIAN NAVA

1980-1981

Julian Nava was the first Mexican-American to become ambassador to Mexico. In naming Nava, a son of poor Mexican migrants and civil rights activist during the heights of the Chicano Movement, President Jimmy Carter ignored successive Mexican governments' suggestions against sending a Mexican-American envoy. <sup>1</sup> While Nava's predecessor was chosen to please the Mexican government, which had requested a "non-hyphenated American" as ambassador, <sup>2</sup> Nava's nomination was based on electoral expediency. Disagreements on gas prices and President José López Portillo's <sup>3</sup> refusal to retake the Shah of Iran in exile in 1979 had generated strong tensions in the bilateral relationship. It was widely believed that "the little-known academic" from California was appointed a few months before the November presidential elections "for the sole reason" that he was a Mexican-American. <sup>4</sup>

The selection of Nava, after complaints from Hispanics that they were underrepresented in the Carter Administration, left little doubt that the one-term president was more concerned with courting the Latino vote for his unsuccessful re-election bid in 1980 than accommodating Mexico's complex sentiments toward Chicanos. Nava's brief Mexican assignment (barely a year) was therefore marked by the controversy of his ethnic background and criticism that he lacked both diplomatic experience and influence in Washington. Nava returned to the United States in April 1981 after failing to get newly-elected Republican President Ronald Reagan to reconfirm him in the job. In an interview, Nava defended his diplomatic mission and spared no words in denouncing his critics in the Mexican press, which he called "prostitutes." He said the negative reaction to his nomination had been "grossly exaggerated" by "some politicians" and "super wealthy people." Nava justified his

<sup>1</sup> Back in the 1980s, Mexicans felt disdain for citizens who migrated to the United States, an act that was seen as tantamount to betrayal, a view that has largely changed.

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Ambassador Patrick J. Lucey.

<sup>3</sup> 1976-1982; died in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors* (Vintage 1986), p. 471.

controversial relationship with one of Mexico's most corrupt law enforcement officials on the basis that he needed the protection because, "Colombian terrorists were out to kill me." He revealed that he stopped the U.S. Navy from allegedly attempting to conduct gunnery practices off the coast of Veracruz to "intimidate" the government of Mexico into selling more oil to the United States. At 84 years of age, Doctor Nava<sup>5</sup> continues to enjoy the respect of many Hispanics in California who consider him a trailblazer of the modern Latino political movement. He spends most of his time at his horse ranch in Escondido, north of San Diego, where he produces documentary films. The interview took place in June 2011 in the lobby of the hotel I was staying at in La Jolla, where Ambassador Nava drove to meet me.

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*How did you find out you had been nominated by President Carter?*

I found it out in a very strange way. A man called me on a Saturday morning. He asked, "Is this Professor Nava?" "No," I said, "This is Christopher Columbus. What can I do for you?" Then he recited my driver's license; then he gave my Social Security number. I said, "How did you get that?" By now he knew he had me hooked. And I said, "What is this about?" Then he said, "Is 566-97-45 your Navy serial number?" I said, "OK, I'm sorry, what can I do for you?" My tone changed and his did too. And he said, "If this conversation proceeds, you must first promise not to tell anybody about it."

*Who was it?*

He did not say who he was. So I said, "I will not tell anyone, what is this about?" He said, "Your name has come to our attention for consideration as U.S. ambassador to Mexico." I went to D.C. and I had interviews. I knew this was serious because one of the people I was going to talk to was from the CIA. He said President Carter broke tradition from the way other presidents have elected ambassadors. He appointed a committee of about 13 people representing both parties, chamber of commerce, labor unions, men, women and members of Congress and they were then asked when an ambassador position came up in category A, like London, Paris, Mexico, to look around and find candidates and fit what that appointment needed regardless of any other considerations. So my name had come to the attention of the committee. I was told I was one of three and that my name would be put on the President's desk and he would pick among the three even before I met him.

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<sup>5</sup> He earned a doctorate from Harvard University.

*When did you meet Carter?*

I met President Carter after he had said “I want Nava.” He knew a lot about me because the committee put a one-page description for each of the three names.

*Where you the only Hispanic on the list?*

Yes.

*Did Carter mention that your Mexican-American background influenced his decision?*

Not at all. I’m sure that my background was a positive factor, but I learned in conversing with Carter that he thought it was very important that I was bilingual, that I knew Mexico well, that I was active in politics, and that I had been elected to county-wide office in Los Angeles for 12 years.<sup>6</sup> He knew that I was a politician and that I was widely known. All of those factors featured. Some people claimed that it was chiefly because of my Mexican-American background. I don’t believe so.

*Was it your sense that Latinos were underrepresented in the Carter Administration?*

Yes, in great part because they were not as politically organized as Jews or blacks, and they did not make demands like Jews or blacks. Mexican-Americans were described, as one scholar said, as “gentle revolutionaries.”

*During the time you were ambassador, who did you deal with in Washington?*

Department of State. Most of the communication was not with the Secretary of State but with the staff, with the deputies.

*Did you ever have to speak directly to Carter?*

Yes, very few times.

*Do you remember around which issues?*

You don’t comment on that. We can talk about major issues and then you can make an imagination. For example, the United States wanted Mexico to join the GATT.<sup>7</sup> López Portillo at first said Mexico would probably do it and then he changed his mind and that involved a lot of very anxious discussions which gave rise to some negative reporting in the press in Mexico City which people misinter-

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<sup>6</sup> Los Angeles School Board.

<sup>7</sup> General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

preted as not liking me because I was Mexican-American. But they criticized the fact that I was instructed to express dismay that Mexico changed its mind.<sup>8</sup>

*Jorge Castañeda*<sup>9</sup> was particularly upset with your remarks.

Yeah, but he was supposed to. And yet later on in that same year Casteñeda invited me to have supper at his home. John Ferch<sup>10</sup> told me Castañeda had never invited Patrick Lucey to his home and he said, "To my knowledge, I never heard of him inviting ambassadors to his house for supper." And he (Castañeda) was a socialist. I met his wife, who our files described as Russian-born and a Marxist.

*The New York Times* reported that Mexican newspapers' attacks against you were prompted mainly by the fact that you were Mexican-American.<sup>11</sup>

Look, there are about twelve newspapers in Mexico City. Most of them are prostitutes. Even now. The federal government in Mexico pays them money to write articles. So the newspapers, with two or three exceptions, are whores in Mexico. They are instruments of the national government. So they express points of views that the government wants expressed for a variety of reasons, but criticism of me was most prominent the first 4 to 5 months and being a politician I worked to overcome that.

*How?*

I asked to meet with Fidel Velázquez<sup>12</sup>, a powerful man, second only to the President, a wonderful man, a son of a bitch and bastard, but he was for labor and for Mexico. John Ferch kept being surprised of the things I did. We met at Fidel's house. First time he ever met with a U.S. Ambassador and we talked "*calientemente*," we spoke heatedly about US-Mexican relations. And I remember at one point I said, well, look, most of your ministries in Mexico are crooked. *Son corruptos. Lo sabemos*. But you know what, I'm sorry, we have more corrupt politicians in Washington than you have *en el Distrito*. And they all burst out laughing. And so I established a relationship with Fidel Velázquez and all the labor-oriented newspapers in Mexico stopped criticizing *el Embajador* Nava. And I went to meet with the more radical student leaders and again we had some heated conversations which they came to appreciate that they were in Spanish. *Señor Embajador no sabe cuanto agradecemos podemos hablar en español. Lucey*<sup>13</sup> *no podía hablar en español, nunca se reunió con nosotros. No se le hubiera ocurrido. A mi sí se me ocurrió*. So we

<sup>8</sup> Alan Riding, "Mexicans Bristle at Envoy with link to their land", *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1980, p 2.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Minister of Mexico, 1976-1978; died in 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Deputy Chief of Mission.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Riding, *Ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Secretary General of Mexico's Confederation of Workers (CTM), 1950-1997; died in 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick J. Lucey, Ambassador to Mexico, 1977-1979.

talked about education. So the newspapers run by the students stopped criticizing Nava. That happened with about two or three different groups. Then I met with the president of Banamex, a wonderful man.

*Legorreta?*<sup>14</sup>

I think that was his name. The names get fuzzy. And he invited me to eat at his house with powerful people. And we ate with knives and forks with the handles of solid gold. Solid gold! And we talked about international relationships. I went down to more powerful interest groups to explain not just me, but American foreign policy.

*Did Carter give you specific instructions?*

Oh yeah, there was one overriding consideration: we wanted Mexico to sell us more oil. That was the most important single thing,<sup>15</sup> because the Arabs had boycotted the sale of oil to Western Europe and the United States after we had supported Israel. And although that boycott started under President Ford, the impact didn't really hit the American economy until Carter's term which doomed his presidency. Getting more oil was the main thing and I spoke to Jorge Díaz Serrano<sup>16</sup> and he explained to me Mexico's situation, he said is a political consideration. Mexico is not so much mad at the United States, but he said, "Mexico for the first time now is in the driving seat, and all of the hard feelings that we have toward the United States beginning with the war that tore away half of Mexico are coming to light now and so this is behind much of the sentiment. For the first time we can say no to the United States."

*Did you speak with López Portillo about why they didn't want to sell more oil?*

Yes, President López Portillo told me that the main reason he did not want to increase the sale of oil was that it was going to the petroleum strategic reserve. I told him, "*Bueno, Señor Presidente*", I can't decide where the oil goes to and what is used for, but I know one thing, it is not going to go to the strategic reserve for the purpose of war, it is going to go to rescue the American economy and Mexico would do very well for itself. "*Sería muy bien para México a largo alcance, por lo menos hacer un gesto y decir que no puede vender más por las razones que haya.*" And so Mexico

<sup>14</sup> Agustín Logorreta Chauvet, Chairman of Banamex, 1971-1982.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Riding, reported that "many Mexicans" interpreted United States policy "aimed exclusively at gaining access to or even control of Mexico's oil reserves". 'Mexico is looking Kindly but Warily on New U.S. Envoy', *The New York Times*, May 15, 1980, p. A-6.

<sup>16</sup> Director of Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), 1976-1981; died in 2011.

did sell a little bit more oil, but not in the amount the United States desperately needed, because factories were closing.

*Carter said oil, and that's it?*

Oil and let's just simply understand each other and have good relations in all respects. And I said, "OK." So one thing I did while there was to call the president of Harvard University and asked him why doesn't Harvard, where I graduated, establish an overseas study center in Mexico and make available Harvard professors to the brightest Mexican students. Harvard did that. Carter wanted broad exchanges coming together.

*How would you define Carter's policies toward Mexico?*

Respectful and friendly.

*But driven by his interest in oil.*

Well, every president is out for its own country and he was trying to get more oil from Mexico. We were going to buy it after all and at that time Mexico thought it had more oil than it knew what to do with it. Remember what López Portillo said: "*El problema ahora es manejar la abundancia.*"

*Were you aware of the policy review by the Carter Administration that lead to the 1978 Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41: Review of U.S. policy toward Mexico?*

Yeah. It was all obvious things. It was done by Brzezinski <sup>17</sup>, the communist specialist. Brzezinski was afraid of communists everywhere. And there were communists in Mexico and many socialists and I got to meet many.

*What other issues were important other than oil?*

Commerce. Opening Mexico to American markets. Easing up Mexico's requirements that American companies investing in Mexico not need so many unproven and untried Mexicans in administrative positions; having the American companies keep their top staff there for 3 to 5 years, not 2 to 3 years, because the Mexicans were not broken in to handle big new foreign factories.

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<sup>17</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, 1977-1981.

*Was immigration an issue?*

No, it was not a major issue, the number was not large. Mexico at that time had a lot of jobs because of the oil wealth, not until the bust did millions of Mexicans find themselves out of work. So not long after I left, when the price of oil plummeted, you then have the pressure of Mexicans to come up here.

*What did it mean to have a “special relationship” with Mexico during your time?*

Well, the United States has always tried to take advantage of Mexico, the United States regularly screws Mexico. Far too many American politicians consider Mexico fair game for whatever we want to do and luckily I did not ever get involved in any program whereby the United States was taking advantage of Mexico except for one outstanding instance.

*Which was that?*

An admiral and a vice admiral came to visit me in Mexico City and they wanted my permission to allow the U.S. Navy to conduct live gunnery practices off the coast of Veracruz, but 16 naval guns can be heard 20 miles away. The guns would be heard in Veracruz. I asked them to please let me have just one day to consult my staff.

*Do you remember their names?*

No, and I wouldn't tell you if I did.

*What was the purpose of the exercises?*

To intimidate Mexico to sell us more oil. I consulted with the staff and all of them said no, no way, this would turn relations back 100 years. So I told the admirals that I thought this would be very bad for U.S.-Mexican relations and whether or not it would work is not really the point. They argued back and forth. We restated our position a number of times. I told them, “You have my answer. You can go around me directly to the White House and if I'm instructed by the White House, I will of course salute.” I never heard of their project again, which convinced me that they were acting on their own and without presidential backing.

*Did they explicitly tell you that the purpose was to scare Mexico into selling more oil? They insinuated.*



*Did you inform the Mexican government?*

Oh no, they never knew about it. That would really hurt U.S.-Mexico relations because they could always wonder whether they were directed by the White House. After all Mexico had been invaded twice.

*Is the United States unfairly blamed for Mexico's problems or does American arrogance and perception of moralistic superiority justify Mexico's resentment?*

That's very complicated, frankly. If you are talking about Mexico, the U.S. is unfairly blamed, although there are many things to blame the United States for, but most of the problems Mexico has with the United States are made in Mexico.

*How does the "special relationship" manifest itself?*

For most people in the United States and Congress, it is a cliché. But bear in mind, what helps explain that special relationship is that the U.S. Embassy in Mexico is the largest in the world. It is special because there are many issues.

*How much of a concern was corruption in the Mexican government?*

The United States really cannot look down on corruption in Mexico in light of the amount of corruption in the United States. We don't call it corruption, but it's corruption and many Mexicans know that and so they think that a lot of statements by American politicians are simply hypocritical.

*How was your relationship with López Portillo and how often did you meet him?*

Not frequently because he was very busy and so was I, but whenever there was something to talk about he was accessible and so was Castañeda.

*When you met López Portillo was it on your own initiative or at Washington's request?*

No, it was my initiative. I wanted to say hello to him and get acquainted with him.

*In your conversations with López Portillo, did you ask him directly to sell more oil to Spain and Brazil in light of the shortage created by the Iran-Iraq war?<sup>18</sup>*

Oh, sure. He said, "*lo vamos a estudiar.*" Maybe.

*How did you get along with Castañeda?*

He was very anti-American and for a good reason, but he was very snobbish. The first time I went to visit him, he spoke to me in English, good English, slight

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<sup>18</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 1004

Mexican accent, but good English and I answered him in Spanish. Then this charming lady came in with coffee and I asked, “¿no por casualidad podría tomar un buen chocolate mexicano?” “Hay sí, señor Embajador.” Normally, it was not my place to engage a servant in conversation, but we exchanged a few words about the chocolate, which came from Puebla. Castañeda switched to Spanish for the rest of my visit.

*Castañeda resented that you openly said that you were puzzled at Mexico’s warm relations with Cuba.*

I was reflecting State Department sentiments. You have to bear in mind ambassadors are spokesmen, this is not always Julian thinking, this is what Julian is instructed to say.

*Were you aware of complaints by Mexican officials about your perceived lack of influence in Washington?<sup>19</sup>*

I don’t think that makes sense. I did not feel that way. You never know what influence you have. You express your opinion, you report them and during the time I was there my cabinet was reporting more frequently than before and I also had private meetings weekly with the representatives, the CEO’s most of the time, for about a dozen major American industries in Mexico.

*Were you in touch directly with Brzezinski?*

No. I met Brzezinski only once during the qualification process and I got the feeling he didn’t particularly like me. I think because of my connection to Henry Wallace many years ago he might have thought I was a dormant communist. He did not take into account that in 1948 I changed affiliations from the Independent Progressive Party <sup>20</sup> to the Democratic Party and voted for FDR. Also I had gone to visit Cuba right after Fidel Castro had taken over because as a Latin American history professor I wanted to see what was going on.

*Why did you stay on as ambassador after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated?*

He kept me on. I met him in El Paso when he met López Portillo for the first time <sup>21</sup>and we had a brief separate conversation aside and I told him that I would

<sup>19</sup> Alan Riding, reported that “a senior Mexican official complained that Mr. Nava lacked political influence in Washington and was frequently away from his post ‘running the Hispanic campaign for Carter.’” “Mexicans Bristle at Envoy with link to their land”, *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1980, p 2.

<sup>20</sup> A left-wing party that ran Henry Wallace for president in 1948.

<sup>21</sup> President-elect Reagan and López Portillo met for the first time in Ciudad Juárez Jan 5, 1981. According to Riding, Nava had suggested publically that “relations with Mexico will improve under President Reagan,” ‘Mexico brings Trump Card, oil, to talks with U.S.’ *The New York Times*, Jan 5, 1981.

be very happy to stay on and do a good job for him. So he kept me on but then Al Haig <sup>22</sup> called me and said, “Julian, I am so very sorry but the President has just been persuaded by his wife to nominate John Gavin<sup>23</sup>”. I said, “John Gavin?” We were talking on the quiet phone, you can’t break into, although the Soviet Embassy had listening posts right across the street. “Tell me, because my impression was that President Reagan was probably going to keep me on.” He said, “Nancy Reagan has a long-standing friendship, going back to Hollywood, with John Gavin and even if his film career has faded she persuaded the President.” <sup>24</sup>

*What do you remember of that first meeting between López Portillo and Reagan?*

Reagan gave López Portillo a wonderful rifle and not long after that López Portillo gave Reagan a 500,000 dollar horse, a stallion, *el garañón*. That’s what López Portillo told me he paid for it. He gave the horse to President Reagan and I tried very hard to get the Department of Agriculture to expedite a permit so that the horse could come into the United States without having to wait 6 months. But the Department of Agriculture said no. So I told the President. He was surprised. So I said, “We have to get that horse into the United States somehow because you want to give that horse to Reagan on his birthday, right?” “Right.” So, what López Portillo did, he got Governor de la Madrid <sup>25</sup>, who was a horseman, to arrange to have a trailer for the horse just across the border, in a certain location. De la Madrid rode that horse to the border, into the water and swam the horse around the fence on to shore. An assistant in the horse trailer was waiting for him north of the border. They put him in the horse trailer and they drove him up to Santa Barbara to the ranch that Reagan had. De la Madrid conversed briefly with the president, had some drinks and then got on the truck with the horse trailer and went back to Baja. So, the presidential horse entered the United States as wetback stallion. I’m telling you the story that de la Madrid told me. <sup>26</sup>

*Did Reagan keep the horse?*

Yes, but you know what. He cut it; he castrated him. López Portillo later told me, “*Julian, ¿sabes lo que Reagan le hizo al caballo? Lo cortó.*” He said, “*yo me puse a llorar cuando me avisaron.*” Because that horse should have been used for breeding.

<sup>22</sup> Secretary of State, 1981-1982; died in 2010.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, 1981-1986.

<sup>24</sup> See Ambassador Gavin’s interview for his version of his nomination.

<sup>25</sup> Governor of Baja California, 1977-1983.

<sup>26</sup> In his writing of the event López Portillo said that he gave Reagan an Arabic horse, named ‘Alamin’, which was a present to him from Justo Fernández Avila, whose family owned Hipódromo de las Américas racetrack. López Portillo wrote that he asked Roberto de la Madrid to send the horse to Reagan, but did not offer any details, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 1023.

*When you were ambassador, were you aware of cases of corruption in the Mexican government?*

No. That did not come up. One experience I had was that the Colombian M-19, a terrorist group, was out to kill me. I found out through the CIA. It went back to Patrick Lucey. The American ambassador is the most famous ambassador in Latin America to bump off. I informed the Mexican government about this and I also informed that the United States was not equipped to give me any special help that I already got and President López Portillo said we are going to take a number of special measures. He ordered more guards, which I enjoyed. He took special measures which I did not report to the State Department. Their view was that I had adequate protection as much as any other ambassador. The State Department protection was for the ambassador, not for his family, and what López Portillo understood was that these guys in Colombia could go after a family member and not just the ambassador. I had three children there and they were going to school.

*It was known at the time that you were closed to Arturo Durazo<sup>27</sup>, a controversial figure with a reputation of corruption.*

Yes. When he was assigned to protect me I asked the CIA for all the information they had on Durazo. And they brought me a stack of papers about three inches high. And I read all of them. He never knew that, but in short I knew everything the CIA knew about him, which was just about everything there was to be known. We had CIA informants in all agencies of the Mexican government.<sup>28</sup> That's when I learned he was corrupt, but in a manageable way, because he got kickbacks at the airport. He was not involved in violence or other forms of nasty conduct.<sup>29</sup> He was very mean if someone crossed the police, but that was his job. Mexicans were in charge of the staff of the ambassador's residence, the cooks, the house cleaners, the gardeners,—they were all Mexican employees. So he had relationships with them and the drivers that drove me around in the armored car. I never went anywhere two times in the same route. We adjusted my schedule, sometimes I would arrive somewhere earlier than expected, sometimes later than expected, so there was no pattern for the ambassador. On a couple of occasions we had to go somewhere in Mexico City and Durazo took us in his personal helicopter. I'll never know, but maybe he thought there were some possible difficulties in that traffic route.

<sup>27</sup> Chief of Police in Mexico City, 1976-1982; died in 2000.

<sup>28</sup> In his memoirs Nava wrote that there were "sources in very high government positions that were on the payroll of the CIA", *My Mexican-American Journey* (Arte Público Press 2002) p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> Durazo was arrested in 1984 and incarcerated six years on multiple counts of drug trafficking, extortion, cocaine trade kickbacks, smuggling, and possession of illegal weapons.

*Did you know him from before you arrived to Mexico?*

He came up to Los Angeles, spent four or five days. A very active young Jewish guy politician told me that a friend of his, the Chief of Police of Mexico City, was in town and he would love to meet the new pending ambassador. I'm sure he was assigned by Lopez Portillo to come up and meet me. And that's how I met Durazo in the company of his charming wife.

*Why was Durazo waiting for you in the airport when you first arrived to Mexico City?*

He was already looking out over me. He was everywhere or his men were everywhere since I arrived.

*Do you think the bilateral relations have changed in the past 30 years since you left Mexico?*

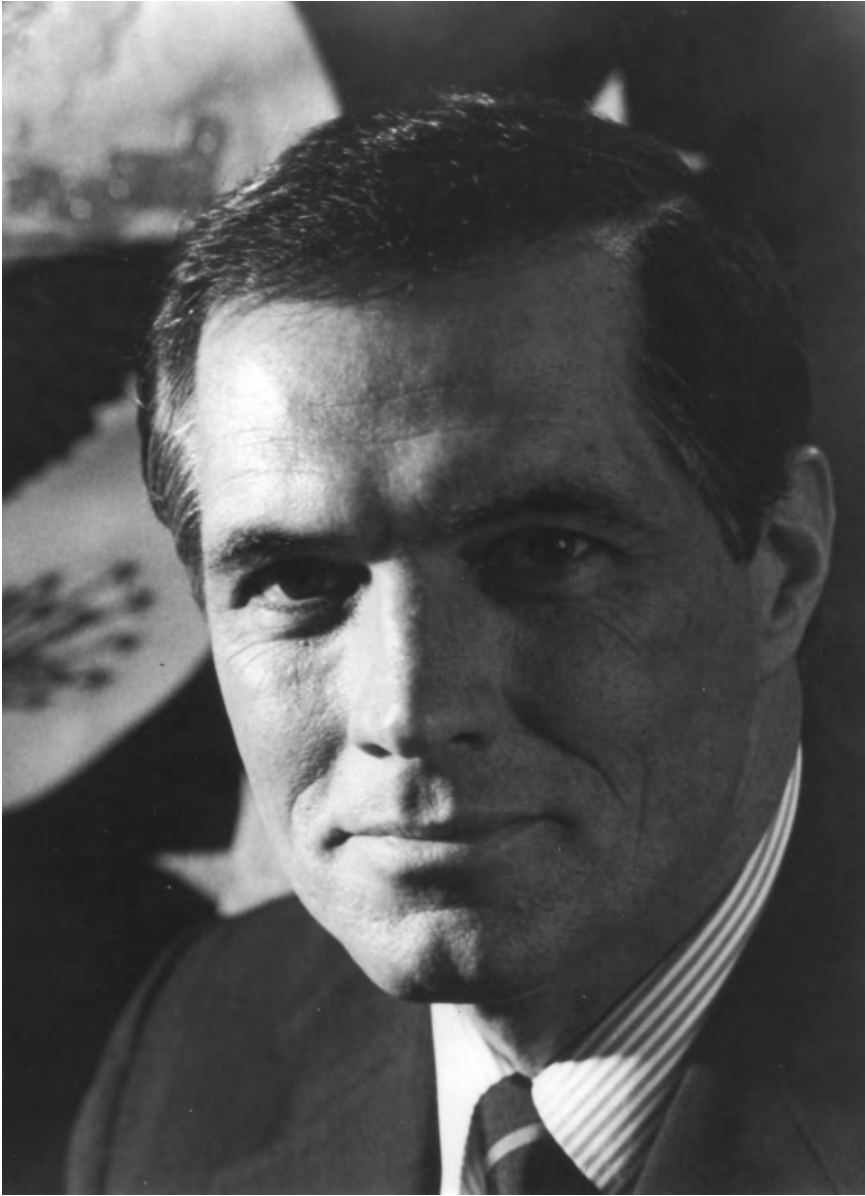
It is very complicated. Things like the Mérida Initiative; like NAFTA, which I'm against because it is a form of neocolonialism, designed to promote trade and commerce but is the freedom of the jungle. Free trade is the freedom of the jungle. The United States wants free trade. Of course they want it. Who is going to benefit? American industries. I don't think things have changed. They just simply intensified. Americans are rightfully concerned that the drug cartels have penetrated every part of the Mexican government. These people have the money and they use violence.

*Were you pleased with your performance in Mexico?*

No, I was frustrated because it was not long enough. I would have liked to continue the things that I started, like the relationship with the labor unions, Mexican businesspeople, and university students. I was just so sorry that Carter was not re-elected because I had just got a hold of the country.

*What do you consider to be the most important thing you accomplished?*

I can't point to any one thing.



**JOHN A. GAVIN**

**JOHN A. GAVIN** was born April 18, 1931 in Los Angeles, California. After earning a degree in Latin American economic history from Stanford University in 1952, he served in the U.S. Navy as an air intelligence officer and as aide to the commandant of the Fifteenth Naval District (Latin America). In the midst 1950s and 1960s, Gavin was an actor, appearing in Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller *Psycho* as well as in *The Intention of Life* and *A time to Love and a Time to Die*. From 1971 to 1973, he was president of the Screen Actors Guild. For more than a decade, he served as special advisor to the secretary general of the Organization of American States. While concurrently active in the entertainment industry, he co-founded and managed business ventures in the United States and Latin America. He is presently chairman of Gramma Holding, an international venture capital firm, and lives in Beverly Hills, California.

During Gavin's 5 years as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, López Portillo and Reagan met in Washington, D.C and agreed to create the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission; Reagan attended the North-South Summit hosted by López Portillo in Cancún with 22 countries; López Portillo nationalized the banks and imposed total exchange controls; Miguel de la Madrid was elected president; Reagan and President-elect de la Madrid met in San Diego; de la Madrid was inaugurated; Reagan and de la Madrid met in La Paz, Baja California; Reagan was reelected; Camarena was abducted and murdered in Guadalajara; and Mexico City was shaken by a massive earthquake.

### 3 / JOHN A. GAVIN

1981-1986

John A. Gavin presented credentials as United States ambassador to Mexico in June 1981. President Ronald Reagan hoped that his choice of the handsome former actor with a Mexican background would help smooth out the bumpy relationship with the southern neighbor. Gavin was knowledgeable about Latin America and fluent in Spanish; his mother was a native of the Mexican border state of Sonora. But his nomination generated controversy even before it was officially announced. Newspaper columnists and government officials were dismayed over what they considered a poor choice for envoy, for Gavin was best known in Mexico for his role in a television spot advertising Bacardi rum.<sup>1</sup> Mexico was hoping for a prestigious diplomat or a politician with unlimited access to the White House, but, eager to avoid tensions with the incoming Reagan Administration, José López Portillo<sup>2</sup> welcomed Gavin and ordered all Bacardi ads featuring the soon-to-be diplomat removed from Mexican television.<sup>3</sup>

Gavin's Mexican tenure coincided with the height of the Central American wars in which the United States and Mexico were on opposite sides. The Mexican government opposed the U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua, and the United States disapproved of Mexico's pro-Sandinista foreign policy. More broadly, Mexico favored diplomatic solutions to the regional conflicts, not just in Nicaragua. López Portillo accused Gavin of conspiring with Mexican conservative businessmen to destabilize his government in reprisal for Mexico's anti-interventionist policies.<sup>4</sup> Bilateral differences around Central America, drug trafficking, and corruption intensified with the inauguration of President Miguel de la Madrid in 1982.<sup>5</sup> Reagan ordered the State Department to pressure Mexico into supporting U.S. policies in

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Riding, "Mexico Dismayed that Actor might be U.S. Envoy", *The New York Times*, March 14, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> President of Mexico, 1976-1982; died in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 1036. Gavin takes issue with López Portillo's version and claims it was he who asked Bacardi to remove the ads.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1173-1174.

<sup>5</sup> President of Mexico, 1982-1988; died in 2012.



Central America.<sup>6</sup> Ambassador Gavin was asked to draw up a list of Mexican cabinet officials likely to cooperate with Washington.<sup>7</sup> Gavin's outspoken demeanor clashed with the new administration, most noticeably with Secretary of Foreign Affairs Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor.<sup>8</sup> In his memoirs,<sup>9</sup> de la Madrid revealed that Gavin complained in private about Sepúlveda's refusal to meet with him. While the Mexican president expressed disappointment with the way his team was handling the relationship with the United States, he wrote that he was "convinced Gavin is to be blamed for poisoning our relationship." De la Madrid called Gavin "proconsul," "arrogant," and "threatening."<sup>10</sup> Years after leaving office, Sepúlveda said that "Gavin is probably the U.S. ambassador that has caused the most damage to U.S.-Mexico relations since Joel Poinsett and Henry Lane Wilson."<sup>11</sup>

Gavin's contentious style exacerbated Mexico's anti-American sentiments and fueled the popular conspiracy theories about threats—real or fictitious—of U.S. intervention. Unlike many of his predecessors and successors, Gavin pushed back. He believed one of his missions was to create a "mature" relationship based on "mutual respect as a two-way street" and that this would only be possible when the political class and the media stopped using the United States as "a whipping boy and scapegoat." Breaking with American diplomats' self-imposed code of silence, Gavin instructed his staff to not leave any unfounded accusation by Mexican government officials against the United States or himself unanswered. In 1985, Gavin expanded his call by asking an American business audience "to demand to see the facts, the names and dates, behind the charges that the Embassy or I personally were leading a campaign to destabilize Mexico."<sup>12</sup> But as scholars have pointed out, his attitude not only placed him in an adversarial position with the Mexican media on important issues, but it also involved him in many petty disputes that a more sophisticated envoy would have ignored.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, two events defined Gavin's years in Mexico best: his 1984 meeting with members of the conservative opposition National Action Party (PAN) in Sonora, and the kidnapping and murder of Drug Enforcement Administration

<sup>6</sup> National Security Decision Directive 124: Promoting Democracy, Economic Improvement and Peace; top secret/sensitive, signed by President Reagan, February 7, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> James W. Wilkie in *Imágenes Recíprocas, la educación en las relaciones México y Estados Unidos*, (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Azcapotzalco, 1991); p 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Member of Mexico's Foreign Service, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 1982-1988.

<sup>9</sup> Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 398-399.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 421.

<sup>11</sup> Gustavo Vega Cánovas, *Bernardo Sepúlveda: Juez de la Corte Internacional de Justicia*, (El Colegio de México, 2007), p. 197. Poinsett and Wilson are considered the most hated ambassadors of all. Poinsett was the American first envoy to Mexico and Wilson served during the 1910 Revolution.

<sup>12</sup> Second draft speech for Ambassador Gavin before the Overseas Development Council, unclassified cable from the Embassy of Mexico to the Department of State, May 3, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Pastor and Jorge Catañeda, *Limits to Friendship, the United States and Mexico*, (Vintage Books, 1989) p. 81.

(DEA) agent Enrique Camarena in 1985.<sup>14</sup> Despite Gavin's assurances that there was nothing surreptitious about the meeting, he was accused of political interference and of plotting with the PAN against the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Ironically, in retrospect, one can argue that he was simply ahead of the times. For all practical purposes, Gavin inaugurated a new policy of regular meetings with opposition party leaders by American ambassadors and high-level officials, most notably President Bill Clinton's historic meetings with opposition figures in 1997. The Camarena assassination, an event that still reverberates in the relationship, was probably Gavin's point of no return. With the Reagan White House infuriated with Mexico's lack of cooperation in finding the missing agent,<sup>15</sup> Gavin took the lead in venting American frustration. He publically pressured the Mexican government and hinted that drug-corrupted officials were obstructing the investigation. Washington's closing of the border by searching every car entering the United States angered de la Madrid. As if the rancor between Gavin and Sepúlveda had not contaminated relations enough, the Camarena affair made it even worse: Gavin accused the Foreign Minister of being "in the vanguard of scorning the murdered victim."

I interviewed Ambassador Gavin at the exclusive California Club in downtown Los Angeles in June 2011. During an hour-long, amicable conversation, I found him well-informed about Mexico and concerned with recent developments, less combative than three decades ago, but equally uncompromising. He denied that he had a public relations problem during his tenure as ambassador. Gavin pointed to the sale of Mexican oil to the U.S. Strategic Reserve, averting a Mexican financial liquidity crisis; a multimillion-dollar satellite contract in Mexico to an American supplier; and assisting the victims of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake as four key but frequently overlooked successes that defined his mission. Of the public relations controversy surrounding his presence, he said: "It really didn't take up that much of my time."

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*Why did President Reagan appoint you?*

I suppose my résumé and background in Latin America had something to do with it. Also, perhaps it had to do with a brief speech I wrote in 1979 on the United States and Mexico. I talked about various situations that existed in the bilateral relationship, including problems that one could see *in* Mexico and *for* Mexico that impacted the U.S. I also spoke about the future, as I saw it, and about the North

<sup>14</sup> Camarena and his Mexican pilot, Adolfo Zavala Avelar, were abducted February 7 1985 in Guadalajara.

<sup>15</sup> Camarena's tortured body was found a month after he disappeared on a ranch 70 miles southeast of Guadalajara.

American Accord, which later became the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Apparently, this speech got to President Reagan. He used the phrase “North American Accord” in his own speech declaring for the Republican Party nomination in 1979. (Although I certainly didn’t invent the phrase, it may have come to Ronald Reagan’s attention because of my little speech.) Also, my good friend and associate Peter Dailey was in charge of communications for the campaign, and he and I had discussed these issues. Another good friend, Bill Clark, was appointed Deputy Secretary of State. He asked me to meet with Secretary of State Al Haig. We had a conversation that was supposed to take 15 minutes and ended up taking an hour. As a result of this meeting, Haig decided that I was the State Department’s candidate for ambassador to Mexico—and as you know, I was the president’s choice as well.

*Did you know President Reagan from before?*

Yes, I did. I had worked for his campaign in 1964 when he ran for governor of California.

*Did you also know him from the Screen Actors Guild?*

No. He had been president of the Guild many years before me. I was president in the 1970s. I met him and Nancy one evening in 1964 at dinner at the home of Robert and Ursula Taylor in Mandeville Canyon.

*Did you become close?*

I wouldn’t say so. We were friendly.

*But you knew him well?*

I came to know him and Mrs. Reagan well. If you are hinting that there was some sort of cronyism involved in my selection, I can assure you that I was lucky, but not for that reason. I’d like to think my track record had a little to do with it. I have been a life-long student of Latin American relations—even before my honors thesis at Stanford. Then I cut my diplomatic teeth in the U.S. Navy as an air intelligence officer and as aide to the commandant of the Fifteenth Naval District (Latin America). And I had the honor of serving as special advisor to the secretary general of the Organization of American States for over ten years. But trust me, when I heard that I was being considered for ambassador to Mexico, I was as surprised as anyone.

*Did Reagan ask you to call him if you ever needed something from him?*

That's exactly what he did. And while I would never have abused the privilege, I truly did have access to him. And that was a good thing—for both countries.

*He trusted you?*

I certainly think so. Not only that, whenever I was in Washington—and I went regularly as part of the job—I would often sit in at the morning briefings of the national security director to the president. There is a quite nice note in his diaries about one of these meetings.<sup>16</sup>

*In his memoirs, José Lopez Portillo says that Reagan asked him if he would accept you as ambassador and that after he said yes he ordered the Bacardi ads that you had filmed removed from Mexican TV. Can you confirm?*

Actually, I called Bacardi President Juan Grau myself and said, "Juan, something has come up." He was a great gentleman and without my even asking he took the ads off the air. By the way, those ads were beautifully produced, shown only in the late evenings and tied to a moderation campaign. Nothing to be ashamed of.

*Did Reagan give you instructions before going to Mexico?*

The president gave me a general understanding that his interest in Mexico was ongoing and he wanted the relationship not only to continue to be good but to become better. Simple as that. As we moved forward, we studied countless issues in great detail. We worked closely with the secretary, the deputy secretary, the national security director and Ted Briggs,<sup>17</sup> who was in charge of the Mexico desk. The issues with which we dealt intensely included: economic matters such as currency stabilization and the prevention of defaults; customs and immigration; strategic reserve contracts; patents and intellectual property agreements; earthquake relief assistance; illegal drug production and trafficking; trade and the establishment of the North American Accord (later NAFTA); representation of assistance to American companies wishing to do business in Mexico and Mexican companies wishing to do business in the United States; a massive amount of consular issues; and both giving and listening to a hell of a lot of friendly speeches throughout North America.

*What was Reagan's main concern with respect to Mexico?*

The concern with Mexico has always been, for decades now, its viability as a nation, as a government and as a people: "Is the economy doing as well as it should? Are people getting jobs? Are the energetic industries producing as they should?" It's

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Reagan, edited by Douglas Brinkley, *The Reagan Diaries*, "Monday, July 11, 1983, Ambas. John Gavin came by. He's a darn good ambassador. Had the usual 'issues lunch.'" p. 165, HarperCollins, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Everett ("Ted") Briggs, Country Director of Mexican Affairs, 1974-1981.

a matter of principle that you don't want to see your neighbor do badly, because if he does, that will also hurt you. The president's concern was just that: determining what we could do to have a more positive relationship with our neighbors.

*Who did you deal with in Washington on a daily basis?*

I dealt with whomever I needed to deal with, but I dealt primarily with the Mexico desk at the State Department—they were my backstop in Washington. I found a really excellent man in charge, Ted Briggs, whom I mentioned earlier. We formed a very positive working relationship.

*How did you get along first with Haig<sup>18</sup> and then Shultz?<sup>19</sup>*

I got along famously with both of them. Of course, they had very different styles. I was naturally afraid there might be some tension after the transition. I was pleasantly surprised a couple of years later, during a state visit of President de la Madrid to Washington. I had a chance to get Shultz alone and thank him for his support on something I was working on. He said, "You deserve it; you're doing a great job." That meant a lot to me. In the end, he became a friend.

*Who in Washington was on top of policy: the State Department or the White House?*

The president shapes foreign policy in the United States. When I led the embassy in Mexico, it was the largest mission we had abroad. It's not today. Right now, missions like Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, have many more people—for obvious reasons. In Mexico, under my flag, I had 27 different departments and offices of the U.S. government reporting to me. If you included our Consulate General and other facilities in country, we had about 1,150 people, 750 of whom were Mexican. We worked closely with the State Department, the National Security Council, and various agencies of the United States government, such as the Department of Energy, as well as the Department of Justice, which included the DEA, FBI, Customs and Immigration. We reported our findings and advice to the secretary and the president.

*How would you define the "special relationship" with Mexico?*

I agree with the old political saw that geography trumps everything. We share 2,500 miles of border that, as I used to say and still believe, unites us more than divides us. But sometimes there are frictions—which there are bound to be even in the best of families. I, for one, am always hoping we can put them behind us.

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<sup>18</sup> Secretary of State, 1981-1992; died in 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Secretary of State, 1982-1989.

I worked hard to do so and to move the relationship forward. Mexico is an important nation. When I was ambassador, the Mexican economy was the fifteenth largest in the world. Today it's considerably larger, even with all the problems. To me, the key in any relationship—particularly one as important as the one between the U.S. and Mexico—is to respect each other and remember that respect is a two-way street.

*Was it?*

Not always. I remember a friend and high official of the government of Mexico saying to me once, "Jack, we have to attack the U.S." I simply told him that in that case, I would—respectfully—have to defend it. My mantra was that respect is a two-way street.

*And today?*

I don't know what it is today. What I remember is that in the 1980s there were 22 newspapers in Mexico City with a total circulation of something like 750,000. All of those papers were supported, in one way or another, by the government. So one had to assume that what they printed was sanctioned by the regime. Actually, some were reasonably fair, but unfortunately some were trying to defend against the imagined wrongdoings of "the colossus to the north" —and in those cases, we had to respond. I don't keep up much with the Mexican press these days. It takes me long enough to plow through the U.S. papers I subscribe to!

*You define mutual respect as a two-way street. When you were ambassador you tried to get that message across. Did you succeed?*

Who knows? I think I succeeded with some people. A lot of people have even thanked me.

*You were very outspoken against Mexico's traditional posture of blaming the United States for just about everything that went wrong. Were you effective?*

I may have been outspoken, but as I've said, I was always respectful. The record will show that. Anyway, I don't want to spend too much time raking over the public relations issue, so to speak. It really didn't take up that much of my time. What I mainly remember was how interesting it was to deal with Mexico's leaders, who—with very few exceptions—were friendly, frequently charming, affable, outgoing people with whom you could sit and have breakfast or lunch. You could talk about issues and discuss them in an open, amicable way. People who got beyond ideology, if you will.

*To what extent was Mexico's friendship with Cuba an issue?*

I didn't consider it an overwhelming issue. The Mexicans understandably had a desire to underline their autonomy and honor the Estrada Doctrine. It had little to do with supporting communism and everything to do with domestic policy. Mexico's leaders felt they had to stand by this small island and offer solidarity. I took it for what it was worth.

There were times we tried to make contact with Cuban figures, through well-placed individuals in Mexico, but it never did come to much. Remember, this was the Cold War. The Soviet Union was trying to create mischief throughout Latin America through their surrogates in Cuba. The Contadora discussions were an annoyance to some in Washington, but they never struck me as being much more than theatre. The last thing in the world that the PRI wanted was to be taken over by a system such as Mr. Castro was peddling.

*Was corruption an issue that took a lot of your time, particularly after Camarena?*

I don't think it took more or less of my time; it was just part of the job. My job was a 24-hour-a-day job. I really did work 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. Long days at the office, then often official events running late into the night. Not to mention the homework! I enjoyed it, but it was intense. Issues of all complexions showed up in their place and in their time.

*Which were those?*

I wouldn't attempt to list all of them, even if I could remember without a prompter. But some of the more interesting ones for me were: in 1981, negotiating the first contract for Mexican oil for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve; then in 1982, a long weekend in Washington when we paid Mexico \$1 billion, up front, for additional crude oil supplies in order to avert a financial liquidity crisis in Mexico. That's an event I won't easily forget. When the Camarena kidnapping, torture and assassination took place, our government was infuriated and many people in the United States were outraged. It was a very, very difficult time—particularly when certain people in the Mexican government were arrogant and supercilious about it.

*Was the Camarena case a turning point for you as ambassador?*

I suppose it was. More so than the earthquake.

*Why?*

Don't misunderstand, the earthquake presented a challenge and I think my team rose to it. I was flying into New York on my way to Geneva to give a speech when I learned about it. When I got off the plane at JFK, a U.S. Air Force jet was waiting to take me right back to Mexico. In the morning, I took a helicopter to survey the damage. As soon as I got back to the Embassy, we divided Mexico City into sectors for assistance, with one of my department heads working with the appropriate Mexican official in charge of his or her sector. We began bringing in C-5 military transports with all of the things we needed, or thought we needed, for the relief effort.

*How did the dispute about the number of casualties come about?*

Who knows how or why people say things in stressful situations? We were trying to report casualties accurately, but it was as if we were trying to do something evil by reporting casualties at all. So I said to my team, "Just lay back and let the other embassies make the counts." Our focus was to bring help in.

*There was a sense back then that the Camarena case ended the little trust that existed toward the Mexican government in terms of being able to collaborate in the battle against drugs.*

I wouldn't say "ended"—the only way we will make headway against this problem is if our governments can coordinate efforts on both sides of the border. But it did deliver a blow. The narcotics traffickers killed one of our crew. I cared about that. The attitude that the Camarena case should be overlooked, that he was no better than a gangster—involved in drugs, just wearing a badge—was not acceptable to us. In the case of Camarena specifically, it was particularly sad to be hearing those sorts of allegations, because he was a fellow who had really bought into the program. He was one of those people who was really out to do his job as best he could. That's what got him into trouble. I'm not saying that all people in law enforcement on this side of the border are saints. We know that's not true. But Camarena was one of the good ones. I thought it was a shame that some Mexican government figures took a dismissive attitude.

*It was believed back then that the Mexicans tried to cover up the crime.*

There did seem to be a lot of cover up. For example, it was very, very hard for us to get the tapes that the assassins made of the torture and the killing. Of course, we finally got them. The DEA felt that part of the problem was that a large number of government officials were involved in the narcotics trade (or payoffs, or bribes or whatever) and that the Mexican government had no idea about it. The DEA made a list of officials they claimed were implicated. That list included a couple of pretty high-ranking



people. I discussed the list with my DEA chief, my CIA chief, my deputy chief of mission, of course, and others—in discreet circumstances—and I asked, “Do you really know that these people are involved? Do you have any real proof or is it all hearsay or circumstantial?” They claimed that they had enough evidence to pinpoint people and wanted it called to Miguel de la Madrid’s attention, but I was still uneasy about it.

*Did you give the list to de la Madrid?*

I was not sure what it would accomplish, but I did go to de la Madrid despite my reservations. I told him I had this list and wanted him to know that I felt there could be something to it, at least in some cases, but that I was hesitant to show it to him. I didn’t want him to think I had come to accuse him or his team in any way, especially without a bona fide case. He asked to keep the list, but I didn’t want it to get out there.

*What did he say?*

He said, “This is very serious—very serious.” I told him I was fully aware of the gravity of the situation—that was why we were meeting.

*Did he defend people on the list?*

Not exactly. He just kept repeating that it was very serious. He didn’t have to tell me, I knew it was serious. I could also see he was not pleased.<sup>20</sup>

*Was Manuel Bartlett on the list?*

No.

*There were reports that one of the voices on the tape of Camarena’s torture was Bartlett’s.*

That’s not true. Bartlett was seriously maligned by a paid informant. In federal court in Los Angeles, during the Zuno<sup>21</sup> trial, this informant (whom many people in and out of the DEA believed to be scum) testified that he saw 27 people in the infamous house in Guadalajara, where they held, tortured and killed “Kiki” Camarena. Among the names he listed was Bartlett’s. That’s not credible. The song this bird sang is an unfortunate example of certain elements of the Department of Justice and DEA believing that the end justifies the means.

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<sup>20</sup> De la Madrid discarded Gavin’s list as “gossip.” He asked to be shown “proof” of accusations against the son of the secretary of defense, other cabinet members and three state governors, but Gavin was unable to provide any “concrete” evidence. De la Madrid, “Cambio de Rumbo” (Fondo de Cultura Económica 2004), p. 419.

<sup>21</sup> Ruben Zuno Arce, brother-in-law of former President Luis Echeverría, was convicted in 1992 and sentenced to life in prison in California for his role in the murder of DEA agent Camarena.

*How do you know it wasn't true?*

Do you really think the second most powerful official in the Mexican government would fly up to Guadalajara from Mexico City to have a drink with a notorious and sadistic narco-trafficker while they tortured and killed an American agent? As a former Secretary of *Hacienda* (not from the PRI) said to me, "Not even Bartlett's worst enemies would believe that nonsense."

*Regardless of whether he was present or not, did Bartlett have anything to do with the Camarena affair or the cover-up?*

No. He tried to help. My reading of Bartlett is that he is *un soldado del PRI*. Bartlett tried to clean up his ministry. He had a lot of problems doing that, including (according to our sources) with a long-time Gobernación operative named Fernando Gutierrez Barrios, who was kept in his post at Gobernación by the president. Bartlett and I did not always agree on things, but I always respected him and I think it was mutual. I think Bartlett was pretty much of a mensch, as they say. For example, who really gave the order to turn off the computers when Cárdenas was ahead in the 1988 election?

*Bartlett was blamed for it.*

And he never said a thing, did he? I understand de la Madrid admits to it in the book he published in 2004.<sup>22</sup> There was an editorial in *The New York Times*<sup>23</sup> excoriating de la Madrid for letting somebody else take the blame before finally owning up to it. Bartlett's silence on the matter was very manly.

*During the month Camarena was missing, who did you deal with in the Mexican government?*

Mostly we dealt with Attorney General Dr. Sergio García Ramírez and with Secretary of Gobernación Licenciado Manuel Bartlett, and officials in their ministries. We pretty much wrote off Sepúlveda, who was in the vanguard scorning the murder victim.

*Did you trust them?*

There was a wonderful writer, Finley Peter Dunne, who said, "Trust everybody, but cut the cards."

*In late February 1985, while Camarena whereabouts were still unknown, you were called to Washington for consultations. Upon your return, you met with de la Madrid. Did you deliver a message from Reagan?*

<sup>22</sup> Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 2004), p. 815-817.

<sup>23</sup> Editorial, "About that Close Election...", *The New York Times*, March 15, 2004.

I told de la Madrid, on behalf of the president, the secretary of state and everybody concerned in the US government, that we appreciated the cooperation we were receiving and would be especially grateful if together we could solve this heinous crime. In any event, it continued to be a slow process.

*Why?*

I often asked myself that question.

*Nevertheless, you praised de la Madrid, calling him, "An honest and upright man." You said, "We have faith in him and we have hope for his program." Why?*

At the time I said that, I really meant it. I hoped that he would take the message to heart—that's what we needed, that's what I hoped he would be.

*Did you warn de la Madrid that Mexico could become like Colombia if drug traffickers were allowed to expand their empire unchecked?*

I did. Not only de la Madrid, but also Sepúlveda. Sepúlveda's reaction was *soberbio como el solo* – that it was our problem; the demand was in the US. Although the latter part was certainly true, I argued that Mexico would be threatened and impacted by this business if we did not come together to get the gangs under control. I said to them, "Narcotraffickers will have sums of money so great that if you think Alvaro Obregón's famous phrase, '*No hay político que aguante un cañonazo de 50,000 pesos*' was prescient, wait until you see what *cañonazos* these fellows are going to send in the future." Even so, I had no idea at the time how bad it would become.

*Did your warnings upset them because they did not believe you?*

I don't know what they believed. I just thought it was a shame. It was all about pretending that nothing was happening, just to save face.

*How did you get along with Lopez Portillo?*

I got along with him splendidly.

*Why did he threaten to sue you?<sup>24</sup>*

Oh, that. He not only threatened to sue me, he challenged me to a duel! It was really just another case of not being able to admit being wrong. He had already been out of office for four years and his reputation was a shambles. People were barking at him in the streets. The thing came up because I was in Washington (after having resigned),

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<sup>24</sup> UPI wire, "Gavin is a Slanderer, López Portillo Asserts," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1986.

having been called to testify before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and, specifically, the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs chaired by Senator Jesse Helms.<sup>25</sup> At one point Helms said, “Now, this fellow, López Portila [sic], is one of the richest men in the world, isn’t he?” I said I had heard allegations to that effect (true) but that I had not been presented with any actual proof (also true). This was one of several tangents the chairman wanted to pursue that I was really trying to avoid. I saw no point in needlessly embarrassing the Mexicans. The papers in Mexico printed the story straight—except one. That one printed that I—not Senator Helms—had accused López Portillo of being one of the richest men in the world. I heard that López Portillo was upset by a mutual friend, and I sent word through that person it was one reporter’s lie and to look at the other publications. But he had already published an open letter. I sent him the transcription of the hearing with a cover letter asking for a retraction and a letter of apology. The poor man did not respond. I actually felt quite sorry for him.

*Did López Portillo let you know ahead of time about his decision to choose de la Madrid as his successor?*

I heard those stories—that he had to check with me. That’s rot. It’s just an urban myth that used to be bandied about in Mexico. Of course, inside the Embassy we discussed the possible candidates (the so-called *tapados*) and projected various scenarios. I thought de la Madrid was very impressive at that time.

*Was it the list that you showed de la Madrid that turned him sour?*

It did seem to bother him.

*Were you ever told to moderate your public statements against Mexico’s attacks on the United States and allegations about a U.S. conspiracy to destabilize the Mexican government?*

Certainly not by my government. Anyway, most of those silly stories fell of their own weight.

*During the 71 years of the PRI reign, was there a tacit agreement on the part of the United States to ignore corruption, electoral fraud, abuse of power and violations of human rights, as long as the PRI guaranteed internal political stability?*

That’s a complicated and heavily loaded question. I can only respond for five-and-a-half of those 71 years. Anyway, things are very different today. In many

<sup>25</sup> On June 26, 1986, the Senate sponsored hearings on Mexican political corruption where Gavin testified. “2 Mexicans Linked to Drugs by Helms,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 1986.

ways, Mexico is doing better, is more democratic, more mature—despite all the problems, including drugs.

*How would you explain these policies, competing priorities, and stability over democracy at the time when there was still communism?*

You can describe it that way if you wish. Obviously, the important thing for the United States is to have stable, preferably democratic, friendly nations and governments on its borders. The United States' interest with reference to Mexico is that Mexico prospers. That's what I told Al Haig at our first meeting. I thought, and I still believe, Mexico is the most important relationship we have. When I became ambassador, my goal was to try to break the traditional mindset that existed about each other—on both sides. I felt it was time that we dealt with each other as adults and in a context of mutual respect. Somebody said, 'You can't change it—you can't break the mold in a few years.' My response was that I knew I couldn't change it 180 degrees, but that if it changed even two degrees, the mold would have been broken and our future as neighbors might become more fruitful.

*Did you?*

I like to think I did. Some people think I did. I hope it's for the better.

*Did you resign because you were frustrated?*

No. I just thought it was time to go back and replenish the larder.

*How would you describe the role of the U.S. ambassador to Mexico?*

His or her first commission is to enhance the relationship, to make it more cooperative and, consequently, more profitable—not just in the financial sense, but profitable in every respect for the people on both sides of the border. And you do that by explaining the United States in Mexico, and by whatever you can do to help Mexico in the United States. I think that the relationship, if it survives the current strains—and it will—is going to someday mature into what we would like it to be: a relationship of mutual cooperation, mutual respect and, one hopes, mutual profitability. Quite simply, a two-way street.

*Has the relationship changed since you were ambassador?*

I think it has, and in many ways for the better. We will always have problems; but as the relationship continues to mature, we will more readily have the means to remedy them. I have great hopes for the North American Free Trade Agreement.



**CHARLES J. PILLIOD, JR.**

**CHARLES J. PILLIOD, JR.** was born in 1918 in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. During the Depression, his family moved from the farm where he had grown up into town. His father opened a small dry cleaning shop where Pilliod worked after school. He attended Muskingum College and later Kent State University. In 1941, when he could no longer afford school, he dropped out and got a full-time job at Goodyear earning 67 cents an hour. Through the following decades, he worked his way up the corporate ladder. In the 1950s he was sales manager and director in Peru and Colombia, and in 1963 became managing director in Brazil. From 1974 to 1983, he was chairman and CEO of Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. After 42 years of service, he retired in 1983. Three years later, he was nominated ambassador to Mexico. He was awarded the Order of the Aguila Azteca by the Mexican government.

During Pilliod's two years and five months as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Reagan and de la Madrid met in Mazatlan; Carlos Salinas de Gortari was elected president in a disputed election; and George H. W. Bush and Salinas met in Houston before their respective inaugurations and proclaimed a "new era" of understanding.

## 4 / CHARLES J. PILLIOD, JR.

1986-1989

Charles J. Pilliod Jr. was nominated ambassador to Mexico in August of 1986 and presented credentials that November. In replacing the outspoken John Gavin with the pragmatic Ohio businessman and recently retired chairman of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, President Ronald Reagan sought to shift the focus from the contentious political issues that had strained the relationship to more promising themes such as trade and investment. President Miguel de la Madrid <sup>1</sup> had signaled his decision to open up Mexico to the world by joining the GATT and signing a bilateral agreement on trade and investment with the United States. During his presidential campaign in the 1980s, Reagan envisioned a North American trade accord with Mexico, but political differences over Central America, the slaying of a U.S. drug agent and charges of corruption against the de la Madrid administration made it impossible to discuss. The economic reforms started under the de la Madrid administration were seen as consistent with the Reagan administration's desire to begin exploring the idea of a free trade accord with Mexico. With no diplomatic experience other than serving as a sales representative for Goodyear in Latin America, Pilliod's friendship to a top Mexican businessman<sup>2</sup> and corporate profile were the appropriate mix to get the relationship back on track and emphasize economic and trade ties.

From day one, Pilliod portrayed Mexico in a favorable light and asked his staff to stress the positive side as much as the negative in the embassy's diplomatic cables to Washington. De la Madrid instructed Foreign Secretary Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor "to take advantage of the Ambassador's cordiality" and to try to improve relations.<sup>3</sup> De la Madrid wrote in his memoirs that replacing Gavin with the discreet Pilliod was an indication of change in Reagan's policies toward Mexico.<sup>4</sup> "With the

<sup>1</sup> President of Mexico, 1982-1988; died in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Pilliod was known to be a friend of Romulo O'Farrell, the then influential owner of the television conglomerate Televisa and the newspaper *Novedades*.

<sup>3</sup> William Stockton, "Mexico Glad as new U.S. envoy accents positive," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo*, (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 615.



predisposition that any person would be a better ambassador than Gavin, I found out during my trip to Washington that Pilliod is a man of gentle and positive manners. In contrast with Gavin, who can be characterized as a Mexican style *'grillo,'*<sup>5</sup> Pilliod seems to have the qualities of an *All American.*<sup>6</sup> De la Madrid met Pilliod during his working visit to Washington from August 12-14, 1986. The last day of the visit, the White House announced Pilliod's nomination.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams did not entirely share Pilliod's positive attitude toward Mexico. They resented Mexico's active regional diplomacy against Reagan's intervention in Central America. As Reagan and de la Madrid approached their final year in office, they planned to meet for the last time in Mazatlan in February 1988, an encounter that Abrams believed key to influencing what Mexico would do in the next administration. In a confidential memorandum written in preparation for the secretary of state's discussions with the ambassador on the upcoming presidential trip, Abrams recommended asking Pilliod a list of tough questions that he wrote for Shultz:

"Do you agree with our approach to the meeting of placing bilateral relations in the best possible light while hitting the GOM hard in the private meeting on areas of disagreement? Do you share our view that Mexico is unlikely to change its approach on Central America as long as Sepúlveda is Foreign Secretary? How do you think we should treat this issue at the summit? I understand that Foreign Minister Sepúlveda wishes to have a joint press conference after the summit. I do not wish to share a podium with Sepúlveda. Do you have any ideas on how we can ensure that the U.S. perspective is treated properly by the Mexican media?"<sup>7</sup>

Under the safe assumption that PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari would be elected president in the July 1988 elections, Abrams recommended "to ask Ambassador Pilliod to discuss his views on Salinas, as well as, on how U.S. actions in the coming months could influence the PRI candidate in his selections of a cabinet." Pilliod was also to be asked if he believed that the Mexican government was "capable" of doing more to combat narcotics, as well as what his assessment of the "impact in Mexico" would be if the United States "failed to certify Mexico as fully cooperating" on the narcotics issues.<sup>8</sup> Based on the answers given by Pilliod, in a subsequent memorandum, Abrams wrote that there were "little prospects" of changes in Mexico's Central American policy as long as Sepúlveda was Foreign

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<sup>5</sup> Gossiper.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Briefing memorandum, "Checklist for our meeting with U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Charles Pilliod on Monday February 6, at 2:00 P.M." 2 pages, January 29, 1988, unclassified by the Department of State on June 18, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Secretary and that the “political stigma” of decertifying Mexico would “seriously damage” the relationship.<sup>9</sup>

For some conservatives in the Reagan administration and Congress, Pilliod was seen as too soft on Mexico and, as one U.S. diplomat said, “too quick to jump into bed with the Mexicans.”<sup>10</sup> In 1987, Pilliod gave a speech that reflected Abrams’ thinking more than his own. Speaking to the American Chamber of Commerce in Guadalajara, Pilliod said that Mexico selectively interprets its stated principles of “nonintervention and self-determination . . . depending on the ideological orientation of the government in question.” For example, he added, communist Nicaragua violates those principles but still gets support from Mexico. Also, Mexico has broken diplomatic relations with Pinochet’s Chile, which Pilliod said is accused of human-rights abuses similar to the Managua regime. “What we find most surprising— and very difficult to understand—is Mexico’s recognition of, and support for, the insurgent movement in El Salvador, a country with a democratically elected government,” Pilliod said in the speech. “We also fail to understand how such a policy toward El Salvador can be reconciled with the principle of nonintervention.” Sepúlveda was quick to respond that the United States ought to recognize Mexico’s right to make its own foreign policy based on national consensus.<sup>11</sup> Pilliod also addressed the 1988 presidential elections: “In Mexico, there is democracy, but the party that has the majority is the PRI and it will win.” While the PAN accused Pilliod of “verbal intervention,”<sup>12</sup> the Mexican government opted to remain silent.

Pilliod was ambassador in Mexico when Mexican politics were going through turbulent times in anticipation of what became at the time the most contested and disputed presidential election. For the first time, the PRI’s 60-year control of the presidency was being seriously challenged by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a former leading member of the PRI and founder of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who ran against PRI candidate Salinas. Many Mexicans remain convinced to this day that the presidency was stolen from Cárdenas through massive vote fraud. The Reagan administration was well aware of Salinas’s unpopularity but was confident he would win the elections, “perhaps with electoral fraud.”<sup>13</sup> Pilliod

<sup>9</sup> Confidential memorandum to Secretary Shultz from Elliot Abrams, on the subject “Briefing the President for the Visit to Mexico,” 7 pages, date illegible, unclassified by the Department of State on June 18, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Storer H. Rowley, “U.S. Envoy Hits Sensitive Nerves Among Mexicans,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> “Briefing the President for the Visit to Mexico,” confidential memorandum to Secretary Shultz from Elliot Abrams, 7 pages, January 26, 1988, unclassified by the Department of State June 18, 1997. “Popularity of de la Madrid’s handpicked successor, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, suffering from his identification with the GOM austerity policies. Campaign off to shaky start. Salinas certain to win, but perhaps with voter absenteeism, electoral fraud,” p. 1.

met with major political figures, including Salinas, PRI Chairman Luis Donaldo Colosio<sup>14</sup> and representatives from the PAN. In January 1989, at the outset of the Salinas administration, Pilliod paid a “courtesy call” to Colosio. He reported back to Washington that Colosio told him that “Cárdenas appeared to be in danger of being captured by the Communists” and that the PRD “appeared to be built on the structure of the old Mexican Communist Party.” Pilliod commented that it was a “very friendly, constructive meeting, most appreciated by the young ruling president.”<sup>15</sup>

Pilliod remained ambassador through the first six months of the Salinas administration. He had the opportunity to witness Salinas’s first round of economic reforms, including the early liberalization of Mexico’s foreign investment laws, which up until 1989 had prevented majority foreign ownership of businesses. Pilliod said that with the changes, U.S. companies would no longer “fear” that future administrations may come along and say they are not entitled to invest more than 49 percent in Mexican companies. The reforms also opened new areas to foreign investment that had previously been off limits. In many respects, Pilliod can be credited with refocusing the relationship and creating the context for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations that began two years after he left Mexico.

Pilliod’s mostly low-key diplomacy paid off. In his memoirs, de la Madrid credited Pilliod’s “attitude” for “lessening tensions.” “He has been a good ambassador,” he wrote, “precisely because he does not make statements, because he does not move, because he is not an activist.”<sup>16</sup> But while he was careful not to hurt Mexican sensitivities, Pilliod admitted to having been “a little puzzled” with Mexico’s conspiratorial theories against the United States when he first arrived in 1986, according to an American academic who spoke to him while he was still ambassador.<sup>17</sup>

I was unable to interview Ambassador Pilliod. His wife, Nancy, informed me in an email that he was “experiencing many health issues” and would not be able to receive me. At age 94, he lives in an assisted living home in Akron, Ohio.

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<sup>14</sup> Colosio became Salinas’ first handpicked successor, but he was assassinated in 1994 and replaced by Ernesto Zedillo.

<sup>15</sup> “Ambassador Courtesy Call on PRI President Luis Donaldo Colosio,” U.S. Embassy confidential cable, January 25, 1989, 4 pages, signed by Pilliod and declassified by the Department of State, April 3, 1998 under the FOIA.

<sup>16</sup> Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo*, (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 793.

<sup>17</sup> Robert A. Pastor and Jorge Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship, the United States and Mexico*, (Vintage Books, 1989) p. 80.



**JOHN D. NEGROPONTE**

**JOHN D. NEGROPONTE** was born July 21, 1939 in London, England. A career Foreign Service officer since 1960, served as Political Officer in Saigon from 1964 to 1968, and was a member of the U.S. delegation to the Paris Peace Talks on Vietnam in 1969, where he became close to Henry Kissinger. He held government positions abroad and in Washington between 1960 and 1997 and again from 2001 to 2008. Aside from Mexico, he has been ambassador to Honduras, the Philippines, the United Nations, and Iraq. In Washington he served twice on the National Security Council staff, first as Director for Vietnam in the Nixon Administration and then as Deputy National Security Advisor under President Reagan. He was the first Director of National Intelligence under President George W. Bush. His most recent position was as deputy secretary of state. In 2009, President Bush awarded him the National Security Medal for his outstanding contributions to U.S. national security. Fluent in French, Greek, Vietnamese and Spanish, he received a BA from Yale University. Upon his retirement in 2009 he joined McLarty Associates and became vice-president of the Council of the Americas.

During his four-year tenure in Mexico, the United States, Mexico and Canada negotiated and signed NAFTA. The DEA orchestrated the secret kidnapping of a Mexican medical doctor in Guadalajara in 1991. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the 1978 extradition treaty does not deter the United States from seizing criminal suspects from Mexico. Bush promised that his administration would not kidnap criminal suspects from Mexico in the future, but refused to make a more lasting commitment to refrain from cross-border kidnappings. Mexico responded by issuing new rules restricting DEA agents actions in Mexico and forbidding them from carrying guns. Bill Clinton was elected president. Salinas and President-elect Clinton met in Austin.

## 5 / JOHN D. NEGROPONTE

1989-1993

John D. Negroponte, a veteran career Foreign Service officer, became ambassador to Mexico in July 1989 as George H. W. Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari<sup>1</sup> were beginning their respective terms. Fluent in Spanish and deeply knowledgeable of Latin America, Washington's new representative was nevertheless not welcome. His role as Henry Kissinger's envoy to Saigon during the Vietnam War, and his controversial stint as ambassador to Honduras at the height of the American intervention in the region, fueled the Mexican suspicions about an alleged American secret agenda against Mexico. Negroponte was subjected to the ritual bashing in the Mexican press before his arrival; he was called a nefarious "proconsul" and "*puente negro*" (black bridge); and it was said that his nomination was intended to send the message that Washington viewed Mexico as a crisis country and was relying on an experienced crisis manager to solve it. The outrage did not derail his nomination, nor did it interfere in Salinas' and Bush's commitment to a "new era" in the relationship. In November 1988, shortly before their respective inaugurations, the two leaders met in Houston and endorsed the "Spirit of Houston," an unsigned bilateral understanding, stressing common interests and downplaying contentious issues.

When Negroponte arrived in Mexico, Salinas was struggling to overcome the public controversy that resulted from charges by the opposition that the PRI had stolen the presidential elections from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.<sup>2</sup> But, while in Mexico Salinas was portrayed as an illegitimate ruler, in the United States he was embraced as a "reform-minded president" committed to the transformation of Mexico from a "nationalist inward-looking country into a pragmatic outreaching nation," as Negroponte wrote in a diplomatic cable. Key to this transformation was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the "Harvard-trained-president," as he was called in the American press, asked Washington to negotiate soon after taking office. NAFTA became Bush's top policy priority in regard to Mexico. Concerned about Mexican sta-

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<sup>1</sup> President of Mexico, 1988-1994.

<sup>2</sup> Founder of the PRD and 1988 presidential candidate.

bility and the fate of NAFTA, critics later charged that Washington turned a blind eye to corruption, abuse of power, lack of democracy and violations of human rights by the military. When Bush's attorney general complained about the high level corruption in the Salinas cabinet, he was told that the president was committed to "building a strong relationship" with Salinas.<sup>3</sup> To this end, the U.S. exaggerated the Mexican government's progress in the fight against drugs, playing down corruption and glossing over failures.<sup>4</sup> A classified document sent by the U.S. Embassy to Washington listed "ending corruption" as one of Salinas' great achievements along with NAFTA.<sup>5</sup> Because NAFTA was a policy more vital to United States interests than other issues the perception remains that there was a tacit trade-off.

Negroponte was Washington's point man throughout this process. During his time as ambassador, Mexico and the U.S. moved closer than ever before, setting aside for the most part a history of bitterness and mistrust. While Negroponte gained Salinas' trust and had his ear, his direct counterpart was José Córdoba Montoya,<sup>6</sup> the president's economic policy reform architect and most powerful advisor. Often described as the "power behind the throne" or Salinas' "alter ego", there was little that the president decided about the NAFTA negotiations and the relationship with the United States that was not previously approved by Córdoba. Aware of Córdoba's role, Negroponte became closer to him than to Salinas and consulted more with him than with the president. Negroponte barely dealt with the Foreign Minister whose role was largely diminished.

Negroponte remained as ambassador for the first eight months of the Clinton presidency and left in September 1993. He was not there to witness the decay of the Salinas presidency and the Zapatista rebel uprising in Chiapas on New Year's Day of 1994, the day NAFTA went into effect. In a long ranging interview conducted in October 2011 in his office at McLarty Associates, he defended Salinas' record and recalled having been surprised by the corruption scandal that mired the Salinas family reputation and his political legacy. Surrounded by photographs reminiscent of his long public service career with Kissinger and Chinese premier Chou En Lai, Richard Nixon, the President of Honduras, and with Bush in the Oval Office before leaving for Mexico-- he denied that Washington neglected problems of corruption for the sake of protecting NAFTA, which, he said, is probably the most important accomplishment of his entire career.

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<sup>3</sup> Dolia Estévez, "Simulación del Salinismo en la lucha al Narcotráfico," *El Financiero*, March 26, 1995, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Golden, "To Help keep Mexico stable, U.S. soft-pedaled Drug War," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1995, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Confidential U.S. Embassy cable, subject "Mexico: Western Hemisphere Good Governance Initiative," p.4, December 16, 1993, declassified under FOIA April 3, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> President Salinas's Chief of Staff, 1988-1994.

*How did your nomination come about?*

When Bush was elected president, he asked me if I wanted to stay on the National Security Council, at the time I was Deputy National Security Advisor under Colin Powell.<sup>7</sup> President-elect Bush asked me, “would you like to stay?” I said, “We have been back four years and I’m a career Foreign Service Officer and I would really like to go abroad again.” Then General Powell asked me what were my preferences and I started to name a few places and he said, “Don’t give me a list, just tell me the one place you would like to go to.” So I said, “I’d like to go to Mexico.” He went and talked to President-elect Bush and I went to see him and had a nice chat with him. He didn’t directly promise me or tell me he’d choose me for Mexico. He said, “You go and talk to Jimmy Baker.”<sup>8</sup> So I went and talked to Baker and a few weeks later they told me, “OK, we’ll nominate you for Mexico.”

*This was before the inauguration?*

Yes, I pretty much knew when I went to Salinas’ inauguration that I was going to be U.S. ambassador to Mexico. George Shultz<sup>9</sup> led the delegation, I didn’t tell anybody, I’m pretty good at keeping secrets. And there was one Mexican newspaper that said at that time, “Negroponte may be the next ambassador,” but no one paid attention to it. Nothing happened, there was no reaction. That all came later.

*Was Mexico on the top of your list of countries you’d like to go?*

Yes. I like Latin America. I’d served in Ecuador as political counselor and I’d been ambassador to Honduras. I like dealing with Latin America and I’d been a fisheries negotiator from 1978 to 1980 where I met many of the Mexican top officials, Jorge Casteñeda Sr.,<sup>10</sup> who was the negotiator for Law of the Sea and his stepson Andrés Rozental, who was director for North America. I dealt with all them, so I knew Mexico very well.

*Did you know President-elect Bush before your nomination?*

Yeah, quite well, his younger brother William Bush, known as Bucky Bush, was my classmate at Yale. He’s quite a bit younger than his older brother. I first met President Bush on official business back in 1972 when he was head of the Republican National Committee and I was the director for Vietnam at the White House in the NSC. Henry Kissinger<sup>11</sup> asked me to brief President Bush on the

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<sup>7</sup> National Security Advisor, 1987-1989.

<sup>8</sup> Secretary of State, 1989-1992.

<sup>9</sup> Secretary of State, 1982-1989.

<sup>10</sup> Foreign Minister, 1979-1982.

<sup>11</sup> National Security Advisor, 1969-1975.



peace agreement that we had signed with North Vietnam, so that was the first time I'd met him on government business. I've known him quite well from then on. He came to Honduras when I was ambassador. And of course, Powell and I would give President Reagan his national security briefing at 9:30 every morning and Vice President Bush was there when he wasn't out campaigning. So I knew him very well, consider him a friend and I think he considers me a friend.

*Did you meet with him and did he give you specific instructions before leaving for Mexico?*

Not really, no. Well, I paid a farewell call. I brought my family, we had a discussion, but my discussions with President Bush about Mexico really came later. President Bush was very nice to me. He would receive me personally, he did that at least twice. The most important discussion we had was about NAFTA. I went to Washington in March of 1990 and he received me. We spent about an hour with President Bush, Baker and a fellow called Tom Johnson who dealt with Latin America on the National Security Council and myself. That's where I raised with President Bush, President Salinas' suggestion which I had received from Doctor José Córdoba that we pursue a free trade agreement.

*Was that before Salinas came to Washington to formally ask for the trade agreement?*

Oh yeah, it was a gradual process, we managed it very carefully. Salinas came to Washington in June 1990. At that point all we did was to issue a statement that we would consider the possibility of a free trade agreement. On both sides we wanted to proceed carefully. Don't forget from a substantive point of view, prior to that, the farthest we had gotten was sectorial agreements, number one; number two, if you look at it from the Mexican perspective, it was only 1985 when Mexico joined the GATT. That's only five years since Mexico had made its political economic decision, strategic decision, to integrate with the global economy. So this was a big step. I was very much in favor of it. It originally came from President Salinas through José Córdoba to me to negotiate NAFTA.

*Did Salinas ask for NAFTA after his unsuccessful trip to Europe?*

We heard from him that when he went to Davos <sup>12</sup> he met the new Eastern European leaders and said, "Oh my gosh, they are going to be real competition for the savings of the world and for investment monies." They thought that one of the ways that Mexico could make itself more attractive for an investment destination was to embark on a free trade agreement. I think Salinas had other reasons in mind.

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<sup>12</sup> In January 1990, Salinas traveled to London, Paris, Bonn and Davos seeking foreign investment, but he was told that Eastern Europe was their first priority.

These are real market economists. Salinas, Pedro Aspe,<sup>13</sup> Jaime Serra Puche<sup>14</sup>. They really believed in the market and I think they saw negotiating NAFTA as a way towards liberalizing the Mexican economy.

*Did everybody agree on pursuing NAFTA in the meeting at the White House?*

Yeah, although Baker did not want to do a trilateral agreement. Pepe (Córdoba) had suggested a trilateral agreement and Baker really preferred a bilateral agreement, he'd been through the negotiation with Canada when he was secretary of treasury and there was something about that experience that caused him to prefer to do a bilateral with Mexico. That seemed to be the only concern he had. Otherwise, there was great sympathy for the idea. President Bush hardly said anything, he just listened to me and Baker for 45 minutes or maybe an hour, and then said, "OK, go ahead."

*Was there a belief that NAFTA would help improve what has often been a difficult and tense relation?*

I think that's one of the big myths. I don't think Mexico and the United States have had a bad relation. Mexico and the United States have had an excellent relationship, at least since Josephus Daniels.<sup>15</sup> The one bad relationship we had was during Jimmy Carter's presidency, specifically his relation with José López Portillo.

*Robert Zoellick<sup>16</sup>, considered to be the brains behind NAFTA, described it as the "historical reconciliation" between the U.S. and Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Do you agree?*

I think that's based on a caricature of what the relationship has been in the past. My experience and my observation, and I believe this to this very day, is that fundamental relations between the two countries have been very good since the 1930s. We had the problems after the 1910 Revolution and the Cristeros, and the problems of debt, I'm talking about the 1920s, and we didn't have an ambassador there so we sent Dwight Morrow, who was Lindberg's father-in-law, but starting with Josephus Daniels the relationship was extraordinarily good and it was good during the war.

<sup>13</sup> Secretary of the Treasury, 1988-1994.

<sup>14</sup> Secretary of Commerce and Industrial Development, 1988-1994.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt's Ambassador to Mexico, 1933-1941.

<sup>16</sup> Under Secretary for Economic and Agriculture Affairs, 1991-1992.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview, Zoellick said: "From a U.S. perspective the support for NAFTA always had broader purpose than simply trade; it was an effort to engage and embrace those who wanted to change the old corporate state in its... political and social dimensions." Dolia Estévez, "Ronda el fantasma del proteccionismo comercial," *El Financiero*, January 11, 1998, p 3.

*Did Washington believe NAFTA would benefit U.S. foreign policy?*

I don't think that the top leadership of our country thought of it primarily in terms of its beneficial political impacts. They cared about economics. Don't forget the importance of Texas. George Bush, Jim Baker, Robert Mosbacher<sup>18</sup>, the three people most interested in the economic and commercial relationship between the United States and Mexico were all from Texas. They got it, they understood the relationship. The U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission, which has existed in one form or another for many years, was revitalized. We had very high-level participation. If you understand George Bush's foreign policy, you'll understand that he didn't have a very complicated political agenda. He believed very strongly in good diplomatic relations and in his ability to contribute to those through his own personal relationships with other foreign leaders. But there was no hidden agenda.

*But in a 1991 confidential memorandum<sup>19</sup> you wrote that NAFTA could help change Mexico's foreign policy from an "ideological, nationalistic and protectionist approach to a pragmatic, outreaching and competitive view" of world affairs. Can you explain?*

All I was arguing was, "Look, there'll be a political benefit from having closer economic relations." It was an obvious point, it wasn't like we were trying to exert some undue influence or control but rather to say it would bring us closer together. I think it has, actually. Fernando Solana looked at that memo and said, "*aquí embajador es lo que no me gusta.*" I have to find the quote in that memorandum that got him to say that.

*Which were Bush's main concerns with Mexico?*

He wanted to get the NAFTA done. Those were his big personal priorities, he didn't get into the implementing details of the relationship. He left that to Baker, Brent Scowcroft<sup>20</sup> and me, people down the line.

*Was the issue of a one-party system a concern?*

Well, I think they all sort of followed my lead on that, which was to say, "Look, there's nothing to be gained by the United States giving any impression that we want to interfere in the political internal politics of Mexico." We all knew enough about the relationship to know about sensitivities in that regard. We dealt with the government that existed. Being Americans, we quite naturally would have contact

<sup>18</sup> Secretary of Commerce, 1989-1992. Died in 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Carlos Puig, "El memorándum confidencial: Según el embajador, Salinas advirtió que el rechazo al 'fast track' sería 'escupir' a México;" *PROCESO*, May 13, 1991. p. 7-11.

<sup>20</sup> National Security Advisor, 1989-1993.

with oppositionists. I met with Mr. Cárdenas and a number of others. I had Mr. Cárdenas come to breakfast, and there were demonstrators outside protesting. I wouldn't be surprised that the government, or the PRI, had something to do with arranging that, but we didn't get into lengthy discussions with the government about Mexican politics and human rights. We were concerned about some of the incidents that occurred, we monitored the human rights situation, but political reform was not an issue that was on our agenda. We did not make it a priority.

*Was the issue of Mexico not being as democratic as the U.S. and Canada addressed during the NAFTA negotiations?*

No, we didn't talk about politics. We really didn't. We ended up talking about labor issues which have a political element, but that was because the Clinton administration raised the issue of having a labor side agreement.

*The perception remains that since NAFTA was the Bush administration's top priority, other pressing issues were either ignored, put on hold or in the back burner. Is this accurate?*

NAFTA was the priority and then the other priority was dealing with the drug situation. We had no choice because there was a serious problem of trafficking in drugs mainly coming from Colombia, in flights that were landing in Mexico. We actually took some pretty big initiatives to cooperate more with the government about fighting the movement of cocaine through Mexico. We created the Northern Border Response Force, we set up a small cell of intelligence officials in the embassy, intelligence, DEA, etc. which would get timely information from our sources in the United States, the Caribbean and elsewhere, about illegal flights that were coming. Then we would pass that information to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) to try and intercept these flights. Very often the flights would land in the desert and they would offload the drugs into trucks that would take the drugs into the United States. We succeeded in intercepting some of those drugs. Then the other big thing of course was Álvarez Machaín.<sup>21</sup> That was a problem.

*Was the Álvarez Machaín case the lowest point during your term?*

Lowest point is not the right word, because it was a problem that continued throughout the time I was there. I would say it was the biggest irritant in the relationship.

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<sup>21</sup> Mexican medical doctor accused of torturing DEA agent Camarena in 1985. He was kidnapped April 2 1990 by bounty hunters hired by DEA agents and brought to the U.S. for trial, but a judge in California acquitted him and sent back to Mexico. The illegal kidnapping infuriated Salinas who retaliated by issuing new rules further limiting DEA's activities in Mexico.

*Were you aware that DEA agents were running their own secret operation to try to capture the alleged killers of Camarena?*

No, not the DEA, and I'm not sure that Washington knew. The official story that finally came out was that a DEA official in the Los Angeles office decided that we need to get this guy, so he hired bounty hunters. I then learned, because I had to start reading about past cases that this was something that happened all the time, mostly with Canada. We used to have big fights with Canada in the 19<sup>th</sup> century about American bounty hunters going across the border and snatching people. So, they snatched the poor man out of his office, I shouldn't say poor man, because I think he was involved in keeping Camarena alive so that Camarena would give more information. That was the role Álvarez Machaín played. They snatched him and they took him to Los Angeles, that's what happened first. Then Dick Thornburgh <sup>22</sup> came down for a visit of all the *procuradores del hemisferio* that we were invited too. Enrique Álvarez del Castillo <sup>23</sup> was the host of this *conferencia de procuradores* and I took Thornburgh. The American doesn't have to be the number one person, but you would think maybe he would have some recognition there, but we were seated way in some corner. Thornburgh was completely given the cold shoulder by Álvarez del Castillo. This was right after the Álvarez Machaín incident. So that's the way they treated Thornburgh.

*Were other high level American visitors given the cold shoulder as well?*

Vice President Dan Quayle visited Mexico and that's when we had the big rift. It was a long-planned visit, but it happened to coincide with the Álvarez Machaín incident and we met with President Salinas for about an hour. Finally, at the end of an hour, I said, "We have the press waiting outside, it's time for the two of you to go out and talk." President Salinas said no, there's this other matter, and we spent another hour with talking about Álvarez Machaín. He was telling us that he was going to expel a number of DEA agents. <sup>24</sup> I think I talked him out of it. I thought the implications would be disastrous, I said, "I think you two are going to wreck our bilateral relationship. If you're not careful, we're going to come out of this meeting causing grave damage to US-Mexico relations." President Salinas, I think, was quite annoyed with me. Anyway, Quayle went out and had a press conference. <sup>25</sup> We succeeded at the end in persuading the president that he shouldn't take such drastic action, but it was the beginning of the problem of coping with the implications of the Álvarez Machaín case, and it never really went away for the remaining time that I was there.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Thornburgh, U.S. Attorney General, 1988-1991.

<sup>23</sup> Mexico's Attorney General, 1988-1991; died in 2006.

<sup>24</sup> David Lauter, "Mexico Leader Scolds Quayle Over Abduction," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> During a 35-minute press conference after the meeting, Quayle said that Salinas "expressed" to him his "strong displeasure" over Álvarez's abduction. "He felt we needed new rules of understanding" to govern anti-narcotics operations. *Ibid.*

*Thornburgh told me* <sup>26</sup> *after he left office that he had expressed misgivings to the White House about corruption in the Salinas cabinet –including Álvarez del Castillo and Drug Czar Javier Coello Trejo-- but that he was told Bush was committed to a strong relationship with Mexico and wouldn't bring up corruption.*

Well look, I was in government for 44 years, so I know a little bit about the problems surrounding dealing with the issue of corruption. The difficulty of corruption is most reports are *chismes de la calle*. There is no other way to say it. You and I are talking and somebody says, "Everybody knows he's corrupt," and it becomes a sort of a conventional wisdom. It's one thing to suspect corruption and it's another thing to prove it. I've been Director of National Intelligence, I've read lots of reports in my life, I've written lots of reports, it's not easy to prove corruption, so when you tell me, "so and so is corrupt," I'm always very careful in coming to that conclusion. Look how difficult it is to prove in a court of law in any country, including this one. And you can make a lot of terrible mistakes. You can falsely accuse, and that's even worse. I was in Vietnam for almost four years and there was a lot of corruption. Iraq got huge corruption problems apparently, but how do you prove it. Proving corruption is not the easiest thing in the world, so we have to be very careful about allegations like that. Whatever the case, I believe Álvarez Castillo was replaced and Javier Coello Trejo left too. It was not anything I did, and if there were instances of real examples of corruption, then you bring it to the attention of the authorities.

*Did you bring corruption cases to the attention of the Mexican government?*

Yes, it was a military officer in El Paso. We found a video tape in a drug trafficker's house. It was a video of him and his family with the trafficker all going on a picnic together in wherever it was -- Jalisco, Sonora, Sinaloa probably-- and I gave that tape to the Mexican military and quite tragically that military officer committed suicide. I don't remember his name. It was an example of where you actually have somebody in flagrante, but that's very rare, that's my point.

*Did you turn a blind eye to corruption and human rights during the NAFTA negotiations as many critics believe?*

No, absolutely, on human rights abuses we didn't turn a blind eye, but we kept these issues in perspective and we also had a realistic view of what could be accomplished. It was not an objective of the United States policy to change the Mexican political system, or to change the party system. We wrote honest or reasonably honest

<sup>26</sup> Dolia Estévez, "Simulación del Salinismo en la lucha al Narcotráfico," *El Financiero*, March 26, 1995, p. 26.

human rights reports and met with oppositionists and made clear that we stand for democracy, but the internal political situation in Mexico was not a high priority and also the United States and Mexico have some rather unique experiences in that regard. We're all very sensitive to that. We remember Henry Lane Wilson and Joel Poinsett.<sup>27</sup>

*Was it U.S. policy to preserve the status quo by allowing the PRI to stay in power for as long as possible rather than taking the risk of opening the political system?*

That's not really in our vocabulary. Mexicans may think it, some other Americans may think it, I don't think we've consciously worried about it. For us it was an article of faith, it was a fundamental belief that Mexicans are very, very sensitive, it's probably one of the most important things you can understand about Mexico, and certainly in that period, about interventionism. Very simple. We knew, particularly if you're going to be an American ambassador, that you have to avoid the impression, any impression whatsoever, about being an interventionist. To me that's sort of fundamental, and clearly if you start giving advice about how to run your internal political system it's going to awaken all these old apprehensions that Mexico had about the US-Mexico relation. I think you have to work on different things. You have to hope for democratic elections in Mexico, but we Americans have to understand that it's going to happen because of Mexican decisions, not because of American pressure. I did not believe in exerting any pressure in the internal political sphere.

*Are there fixed parameters which define U.S. policy toward Mexico regardless of the party affiliation of the president in power in the White House?*

Yes, this is a huge neighbor, it's the only developing country if you will, in those days third world country, right on our own border. There are unique circumstances, we have a unique history and even then we had a growing Hispanic population in the United States the majority of which was Mexican. There was a lot of awareness of the complexity and extent of the relationship and we know it's about economics, about trans-border issues and it's about the growing Hispanic community in the United States which has only become more important.

*It's about stability in the Southern flank?*

Yes, but the issue of stability in Mexico is wanting prosperity for Mexico and the most intelligent way to promote stability is through good economic development.

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<sup>27</sup> Poinsett and Wilson are known to be the most hated ambassadors of all. Poinsett was the American first envoy to Mexico and Wilson served during the 1910 Revolution.

*During the cold war fighting communism drove U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America, did that focus shift after the fall of the Berlin wall?*

It did shift when Mikhail Gorbachev decided to discourage Fidel Castro from exporting revolutions in their famous meeting in 1986. Concerns about the area changed. Then Baker came into office, and having lived through eight years of Reagan, he didn't want to spend any more time fighting with the Congress about what to do about Central America. And then Bernie Aronson<sup>28</sup> was a real peace-maker. These were still firmly anti-communist people but they weren't as confrontational. The situation had changed enough between what happened with Gorbachev and what happened with the fall of the Berlin wall. There were more avenues for cooperation between the United States and Mexico and all of Central America than what had existed in the 1980s. So that was a positive development in the foreign policy relationship. I remember being very interested when President Salinas met in Cozumel with Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, César Gaviria of Colombia and Fidel Castro.<sup>29</sup> I went afterwards to see Pepe Córdoba to ask him how the meeting had gone with Castro and what he said about helping the rebels in El Salvador. What Castro told Salinas and the others was "I don't dare help them anymore because the Russians, if they catch me they'll cut off my aid." I believe that Castro probably said that and that he did diminish the supply of weapons. And then Mexico ended up playing a role in the peace process between the government of El Salvador and the guerrilla. Baker came down for the signing of the peace treaty in Chapultepec in 1992. The end of the Cold War permitted the United States and Mexico to cooperate more regarding Central America.

*Did the U.S. ever realize that there were other issues in the relation with Mexico other than fighting communism in Central America?*

Well, we never did succeed in doing that, actually we were quite apart between the two countries, it was a pity. Anyway, things did change, I think basically we can thank Mr. Gorbachev.

*In 2010 you were quoted in the Mexican press as saying that Salinas asked in a meeting in San Diego, in July 1992, to include the opening of the energy sector to foreign investment, but Bush, under your recommendations, said no, arguing against the political implications. Can you elaborate?*

I've been terribly misquoted by somebody in Mexico. I tried to explain it, but whoever it was, deliberately chose to misunderstand. What happened was

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Aronson, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, 1989-1993.

<sup>29</sup> Tim Golden, "3 Latin Leaders Press Castro for Faster Change", *The New York Times*, October 24, 1991.



a number of times the government of Mexico raised the issue of labor mobility and wanted to include the issue of labor mobility because it's one of the factors of production in the agreement. You have goods, services, capital, so why not labor. That was the idea, why not labor. President Salinas raised it once with President Bush. President Bush said, "I don't think we could get the AFL-CIO to accept that." But that was sort of shorthand. I don't think he intended, nobody on our side ever intended for labor to be on the agenda. Separately from that when we met in San Diego, that was toward the end of the negotiation, President Bush said, "Why can't you open up your oil investment in the oil sector?" He was just asking honestly, he wasn't putting it on the table, he wasn't asking Carla Hills<sup>30</sup> to make it a negotiating point, he was just asking. Don't forget Bush, like his son, had been in the oil business, and so was Mosbacher and Baker. So they're curious about this, but they weren't pressuring Salinas. I know how explosive that issue is, how sensitive it is, maybe it was an error in judgment on my part, but I have lived in Mexico, I know the whole story of why Josephus Daniels is so popular. So I jumped in, instead of Mr. Salinas answering the question, I answered it for them and said, "Mr. President, this is a very sensitive issue in this country, and it's not something that is in the cards for them, and there's probably no Mexican government that could survive politically if it would make this a negotiating matter." That's what happened. Mr. Bush didn't press the point.

*Salinas tells a different story in his book.*<sup>31</sup>

What does he say?

*He said that when he asked for immigration to be part of NAFTA, Bush answered that in that case the opening of the energy sector to foreign investment should also be included. Salinas claimed he rejected it. This exchange, according to his book, took place during the meeting in Agua Leguas in November 1990.*<sup>32</sup>

That just may be. I just don't remember that conversation, but you should talk to Herminio Blanco<sup>33</sup> about that. It's possible, what Salinas says may well have happened. In Agua Leguas they had a lot of time together, just the two of them.

*How was your relation with Salinas?*

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<sup>30</sup> U.S. Trade Representative, 1989-1993.

<sup>31</sup> Carlos Salinas de Gortari, *Mexico, Un paso difícil a la modernidad*, (Plaza & Janés, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83

<sup>33</sup> Mexico's Chief NAFTA negotiator, 1990-1993.

It was good, it was professional, it was correct, it was not personal, our families were not close. I didn't do recreational things with him, but Salinas and I got along very well. I would see him fairly regularly, but I chose to conduct most of my business with Los Pinos through José Córdoba but Salinas was very generous with his time for me. He gave me access, although I had to get used to Mexican timetables. I had to be willing to meet with him at 9 or 10 o'clock at night if I had something important I had to get done. But I didn't overdo it. The Foreign Ministry would've preferred that I didn't deal with Los Pinos as much but you couldn't necessarily get things done through the *Cancillería*.

*Was Córdoba in charge of the bilateral relation not Foreign Minister Solana?*

Yes, but Solana did have deputies who worked on the relationship, he had Gonzalez Galvez <sup>34</sup> who was very active. A lot of the drug issues we dealt with through Gonzalez Fernandez <sup>35</sup>, he was good, he and Pastorino <sup>36</sup>. They handled a lot of issues, such as border issues. But on the strategic level, the strategy for dealing with the United States was handled by Córdoba working with Salinas and his economic team.

*Did you have as much access as you needed to Salinas?*

Yeah, but it was not unlimited access. It wasn't like we were seeing each other every day, or every week even. But I would say I saw him with regularity, but then of course when delegations came -- mayors, governors, big businessmen, big American investors, all kinds of people-- I had that opportunity to see him. I'd very often grab a minute at the end of the meeting to raise some issue. I felt that I had plenty of access. To me it was also very key that I had such a good relationship with Pepe (Córdoba).

*Did Salinas trust you?*

Yeah, I have no reason to doubt.

*Did he ever tell you he was concerned about his legacy?<sup>37</sup>*

<sup>34</sup> Sergio González Galvez, deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>35</sup> José Antonio González Fernández, PGR attaché in Washington, D.C.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Pastorino, Deputy Chief of Mission under Negroponte.

<sup>37</sup> A confidential U.S. Embassy cable to Washington signed by Negroponte, with the subject: "The criteria for choosing the next President of Mexico" reported that "Salinas has demonstrated great sensitivity to his own image and place in history. He told the Ambassador (Negroponte) on one occasion that he wished to be remembered as the greatest president that Mexico ever had," p. 6-7, declassified by the Department of State under FOIA on April 3, 1998.

No, he was quite businesslike, and he was quite matter of fact. He managed his time very carefully, he had lots of meetings and he did exercise control over his team. He was a real CEO, he was chairman of the board and he was running his government systematically. I thought he was a very persuasive guy, and he spent a lot of time in the *ejidos* trying to persuade people that the NAFTA would be good for them. He didn't act like there was just a one-party dictatorship that could sell anything it wanted to. He tried to communicate with the Mexican people. I don't know what happened to him. I wasn't there for the last year in office.

*Were you surprised with what happened after he left office?*

Yes, well I mean a lot of things surprised me. Some of the corruption allegations, the Zapatistas. I didn't see corruption coming and I certainly didn't see the Zapatistas coming either. When I left Mexico, I left admiring Mr. Salinas.

*You didn't have any suspicions about Raúl Salinas<sup>38</sup> and high-level corruption?*

I certainly did not anticipate what would happen. I had one or two people come to me and allege that his family was involved in unsavory or improper activities, but it wasn't like there was a crescendo or a pattern, something that would really add up to what you would think were troublesome signs. I didn't really see troublesome signs.

*Did you discuss with Salinas the belief that he lost the 1988 presidential elections to Cárdenas?*

I didn't discuss it with him but I would say that our conventional wisdom, our view inside the Embassy, was that he had won but the extent of his victory was exaggerated.

*In retrospect, do you think Salinas's credentials as a new breed of PRI politicians that would rid the government of corruption --as you were quoted saying at the time-- were overblown?*

I think he was a real reformer and that he had a good educational background. I felt he was a good president and that he was modernizing the country. He had a good tenure. It's a pity that his tenure ended in controversy over his family, the financial crisis, and of course, the Zapatistas. A year after I left things were not in as good shape as they had seemed when I left.

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<sup>38</sup> Raúl, Carlos Salinas' oldest brother, was suspected of laundering millions of dollars and of abuse of power. In 1995 he was charged with ordering the assassination of a PRI senior official.

*How would you define the role of the American ambassador in Mexico?*

The role of an ambassador tends to be slightly exaggerated. There's the myth and the reality, so this notion that American ambassadors wield a great deal of influence behind the scenes, have a sort of proconsul role, frankly I don't think it's there. The American ambassador is just like American ambassadors everywhere. For most countries, the bilateral relationship with the United States is the most important relationship they have. So usually the American ambassador tends to be among the more important ambassadors in that country. I think it's a reflection of the extent of the relationship, but the role is to conduct relations between the two countries. I had, I think, a fairly traditional definition of what it was to be an ambassador. I believed in conducting government to government relations. I don't think I had that high a public profile for an American ambassador.

*Do ambassadors play a role in the Washington policy-making process?*

That's true for any American ambassador for anywhere in the world. They play a role in the following way. They may not participate in the interagency meetings, although technologically today it's much easier, but the way an ambassador almost always is important in policy is that people are going to ask, at the end of a meeting, whether it's in interagency or a National Security Council meeting, what does the ambassador think, what does the ambassador recommend. The ambassador is after all approved by the Senate, he is presidentially appointed, so his views are always going to carry weight. Now, some ambassadors carry more weight than others, part of that depends on their own personality.

*How much weight did you carry?*

I think people paid attention to what I recommended and to what I thought. I never asked more than that. I wanted my views to be taken into account. I didn't expect that they would always pay attention to my recommendations or that they would always accept them, but I think they might be used. I was part of the president's team that dealt with Mexico policy, that's the way I felt and I think that's true of any ambassador if they do their job right.

*When you first arrived in Mexico you were not welcome. Why?*

All of that was generated by controversy over policy towards Central America. Before I came people tended to think of me in terms of Reagan's policy towards Central America and what they'd thought of it and I was sort of a whipping boy or a lightning rod for criticism. But then I confronted it. I had a long interview with *Excelsior*. The editor, I can't remember his name, came to see me at my house in

Washington before I went down. Then I got there, it went away pretty fast. Also, I think some people were hoping president Bush would withdraw my appointment, but Mr. Bush wrote a handwritten letter to Mr. Salinas; “Negroponte is my personal choice for this job.” So I had strong backing from the president.

*Why is it that just about every American ambassador has a hard time when he first arrives in Mexico?*

They go through a baptism of fire, but after a little while they see what you do and how you do it and they realize that their worst interventionist fears are not going to be realized.

*By the end of your term, you had gained the confidence of many who in the beginning criticized you. What did you do?*

I think that they set a very low bar for me to get over.

*Or was it what Adolfo Aguilar Zinser<sup>39</sup> told *The New York Times*: “Negroponte conducted the smoothest, most discreet covert operation in the history of U.S.-Mexican relations.” Did you?*

Well, that was his sense of humor. He wrote some very nice things about me after being ambassador to the United Nations. I think he felt sorry. I think he felt he’d gone too far in the debate at the UN Security Council.<sup>40</sup> But that’s a different story of Adolfo and Castañeda<sup>41</sup> fighting for control of foreign policy.

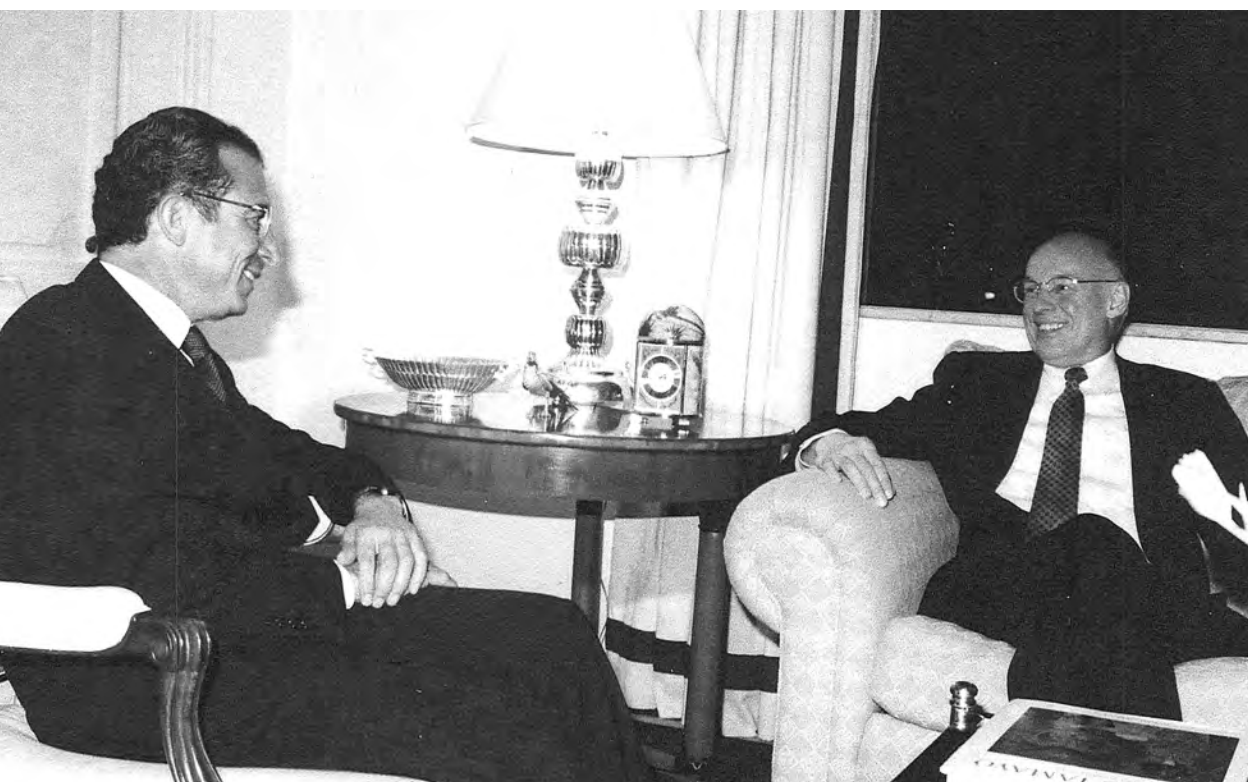
*Was Mexico the most challenging post of your career?*

I would say it was the best post I’ve had. I’ve had a lot of challenging jobs, but I enjoyed this one the most. I thought it was the most interesting. I feel very satisfied by having the fact that we achieved the NAFTA. I consider NAFTA probably the most important accomplishment of my career.

<sup>39</sup> Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 2002-2003; leading scholar, politician and opinion maker. Died in 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Aguilar Zinser successfully lead the opposition in the UN Security Council to the Bush Administration’s efforts to gain approval for military force against Iraq in 2003. The political dispute put Aguilar Zinser and Negroponte in opposite sides.

<sup>41</sup> Jorge G. Castañeda, Foreign Secretary, 2001-2003.



**JAMES R. JONES**

**JAMES ROBERT JONES** was born May 5, 1939 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He was elected to the House of Representatives for Oklahoma's 1<sup>st</sup> Congressional District in 1973 and reelected six times. He served 14 years in the House, including four as chairman of the powerful Budget Committee. Jones joined the Johnson White House straight out of law school at Georgetown University. He was promoted to Special Assistant and Appointments Secretary to the president, the position now called Chief of Staff. At 28, he was the youngest person ever to hold that job. He ran for the Senate in 1986 but lost. After practicing law in Washington for nearly three years, he became chairman of the American Stock Exchange in 1989 and resigned in 1993 to become Ambassador to Mexico. Jones presented credential as ambassador to Mexico on September 10, 1993 and left the post on June 25, 1997. He was awarded the Order of the Aguila Azteca by the Mexican government. Presently, he is a partner in Manatt Jones Global Strategies and a board member of the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

During his 3 years and 9 months as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Congress ratified NAFTA; NAFTA went into effect; the Zapatista took up arms in Chiapas; PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated; Ernesto Zedillo is chosen to replace Colosio; Zedillo was elected president; the peso collapsed; the Clinton Administration granted Mexico a \$12 billion bail-out; Raúl Salinas was convicted of murder; and Mexico handed over top drug cartel leader Juan García Abrego to the United States.

## 6 / JAMES R. JONES

1993-1997

James Robert Jones presented credentials as United States ambassador to Mexico in September 1993, months before what turned out to be one of Mexico's most politically and financially tumultuous years in modern times. In the United States, William J. Clinton had been inaugurated while in Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari<sup>1</sup> was winding down what appeared to be a successful presidency. The landmark North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was negotiated and signed by President George H. W. Bush and President Salinas, but its ratification by a highly protectionist Congress was far from certain. With the reputation of a skilled politician and consensus builder, Clinton offered his old acquaintance from Oklahoma the chance to become his point man in Mexico because, as he told Jones, "NAFTA was in trouble." Jones was seen as someone close to Congress, where he had served in the House of Representatives. He had no knowledge of Spanish and little interest in public service abroad, but he accepted, albeit reluctantly, Clinton's offer which turned out to be one of the most "enjoyable and interesting jobs I ever had."

With little interest in the countries of the Western Hemisphere and more pressing crises elsewhere, Clinton gave Jones *carte blanche*. He trusted him with one of Washington's most challenging diplomatic relations and gave him ample latitude to make policy and run what was then the largest U.S. embassy in the world. Jones dealt with two Mexican presidents of very different personalities. While at the end of his six-year term, Salinas became defensive of his legacy and suspicious of everything and everyone, Ernesto Zedillo<sup>2</sup>, his "accidental successor,"<sup>3</sup> appeared to have a smaller ego to defend and a shorter list of political payoffs. In 1994, three extraordinary events--the Zapatista rebel uprising in Chiapas, the murder of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) presidential candidate Luis Donaldo

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<sup>1</sup> President of Mexico, 1988-1994.

<sup>2</sup> President of Mexico, 1994-2000.

<sup>3</sup> The term "accidental successor" comes from the fact that Ernesto Zedillo was chosen by Salinas, in the ritual known as the "dedazo," to be his successor only after Luis Donaldo Colosio, his first choice, was assassinated in March 1994.



Colosio in Tijuana and the collapse of the peso—forced Jones into crisis management mode. By all accounts, the politician-turned-diplomat handled the threefold crisis with skill and sensitivity. Senior members of the Foreign Service, often critical of political appointees, acknowledged Jones as one of the “non-career ambassadors who had performed well in Mexico City<sup>4</sup>.”

Aside from NAFTA, the one other instance in which Washington paid full attention to Mexico was the dramatic collapse of the peso. Jones played an important role in assuring that the Clinton administration grasped the urgency of intervening to prevent Mexico’s default as a result of what Robert Rubin<sup>5</sup> called “the first crisis of the twenty-first century<sup>6</sup>.” Contrary to Salinas’ claims that he is not to be blamed for the 1995 economic breakdown, Jones believes that Salinas was largely responsible for the financial turmoil that unfolded days after he left office and threatened the stability of the global monetary system. Also contrary to Salinas’ assurances that he knew nothing about Raúl Salinas’s<sup>7</sup> criminal activities, Jones personally informed him of U.S. concerns of a pattern of corruption and abuse of power by his oldest brother.

Jones resigned in June 1997, a month after Clinton’s long-overdue state visit to Mexico, to return to the private sector. In an interview conducted in June of 2011 in the offices of Mannat and Jones in downtown Washington, D.C., Jones spoke candidly about his diplomatic experience. He is particularly proud of having persuaded Salinas not to use force against the Zapatistas and of the United States’ intervention, albeit benign, in assisting Mexico to open up its political system<sup>8</sup>.

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*How did you find out you had been chosen to be ambassador to Mexico?*

President Clinton called me and wanted me to be ambassador to Mexico. I had been approached by the administration during the transition about being Office of Management and Budget director or ambassador to Japan and I said I just couldn’t do it. Then the president himself called in May of 1993 and said he wanted me to be ambassador to Mexico and I said, “I really have no interest in being ambassador.” He said that NAFTA was in trouble and he needed my help and I ultimately

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Davidow, *The Bear and the Porcupine, the US and Mexico*, (Markus Wiener Publisher Princeton, 2007) p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Treasury Secretary, 1995-1999.

<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Rubin and Jacob Weisberg, *In an Uncertain World* (Random House 2004) p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> In 1995, Raúl Salinas was charged of having ordered the assassination of a senior official of the PRI. He was sentenced to 50 years in jail 1999 and acquitted upon appeal in 2005.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1997 mid-term elections, the PRI lost its congressional majority; in 2000, it lost the presidency, ending Mexico’s 71 years of single-party rule.

agreed to do it. I'm delighted I did it; it was one of the most interesting, enjoyable and challenging jobs I ever had.

*Why were you reluctant to accept?*

I had never thought of being an ambassador. I never had my interest.

*Did you have a background on Mexico?*

In 1966, I think it was, when I was a young member of President Johnson's staff, I was sent down to Mexico to prepare for President Johnson's trip<sup>9</sup>, and I got to know the system then. And then my wife and I honeymooned in Acapulco.

*Did you know Clinton from before?*

When he moved back to Arkansas and I moved back to Oklahoma, we got to know each other through our joint political efforts going back to the 1970s and I always admired his political skills. I had actually supported another person in the 1992 presidential race --Paul Tsongas-- and when he lost out I then supported President Clinton.

*How did Clinton think you could help NAFTA and what did he mean when he said NAFTA was in trouble?*

Well, I have had a reputation in Congress of building bipartisan coalitions and he said NAFTA was in trouble and he needed my help. He needed someone who apparently had my skills to be able to bring enough Democrats and Republicans along in Congress to pass NAFTA. That was the origin of it; it was not my diplomatic skills.

*Did Clinton give you a mission or a mandate? Did he tell you, "This is what I want you to do in Mexico"?*

No, I had a remarkably free hand and I told the president that I don't run very well through bureaucracies. He said that he wanted me to go down there and that the first order was to help pass and implement NAFTA and then to basically set the agenda. He said that if I ever had a problem to call him directly.

*How would you describe Clinton's policy toward Mexico?*

I don't really think he had one. He was not really focused on Mexico, and that's why I had a free hand. When I went down there, we established six objectives and were able to move on those.

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<sup>9</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson visited Mexico City April 14-15, 1966 and met with Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz.

*What were those objectives?*

Well, one was deepening the commercial relationship, because I always felt that if you can develop real commerce between nations and create wealth that both peoples can share in, that's probably one of the most important things you can do to create cooperation and peace among nations. So my first objective was commerce, and the first part of that was to pass and implement NAFTA. In no particular order after that, one was the drug situation, to try to keep the drug cartels from growing and becoming too influential in Mexico. Third was democracy, and we put a lot of resources into the 1994 and 1997 elections to make sure that they were clean and honestly conducted, because I felt the three-pronged tool, if you will, to help developing countries realize full First World status, is: one, a vibrant democracy; two, an open economic system; and three, a transparent legal system that people have confidence in. I recognized that the legal system would be the hardest of all for any developing country anywhere, particularly those in the civil code, which most of Latin America is. So we put the emphasis on democracy and commerce. And coming out of that were also corruption issues: how do you clean up corruption and begin to move toward a rule of law that people can have confidence in? Another objective was to make the United States Embassy the most customer-friendly embassy in the world, because for many people the U.S. Embassy is their only exposure toward the United States. We wanted to make the Embassy customer-friendly and we did a series of things to try to accomplish that. Those were the main ones.

*Do you consider United States policy toward Mexico a state policy?*

My first job out of law school was to work with President Johnson, and he was a big believer in continuity. He might not have personally believed in Vietnam, in our intervention, but it was established under Eisenhower and continued under Kennedy. Many commitments were made as a matter of policy, and he believed strongly that we could not go back on those commitments. As you go forward, you change policy but you don't necessarily totally abandon them. Policy is built administration to administration, it is changed from time to time, but the basic outlines of foreign policy stay the same.

*What are those basic outlines?*

The problem with the United States policy toward Latin America in general and Mexico specifically is one of ignoring it, of not paying attention to it, except when we feel we need something--and then we act like the paternal partner as opposed to the real partner. It was one of not abandon but just out of sight, out of mind, and

every once in a while we would come up with an Alliance for Progress or various things like that, and they would last a few years and then peter out.

*And with regard to Mexico?*

With regard to Mexico, our policy--although it was not stated as such--was to have peace and have stability in our bordering country Mexico. We were willing to play along with Mexico's "democracy" under the PRI days, because we preferred stability over real democracy. So when I first came to Mexico and got off the plane and had a press conference, basically the thing that I said was that as far as the Clinton administration, what we were going to do was no longer paternalism but real partnership, and we were going to have respect for Mexico as a real partner, treat Mexico that way and expect to be treated that same way.

*During the 71 years of the PRI reign, was there a tacit agreement to ignore corruption, human rights violations and vote fraud because internal stability was more important for the United States?*

United States global foreign policy was framed in the East-West conflict. So one of our policies was to have stability in Mexico and to have anti-communism in Mexico. Everything was viewed through those lenses. Therefore the internal corruption, the internal politics in Mexico--as long there was stability and basically consensus in support of the United States versus communism, we ignored it.

*Did you ignore cases of corruption that you knew existed?*

Yes, because for United States policy from World War II until 1990, it was more important to contain communism and to keep our friends and neighbors anti-communist. That was really what drove our foreign policy.

*After the end of the Cold War in 1990, did United States policy toward Mexico change?*

My sense is that in John Negroponte's<sup>10</sup> time, there was still the battle of Latin America insurrections that might still have a leftist tendency to it that might not be good for the United States. When I came along, I viewed the world as changing such that we really needed to explain that there was a different view toward Mexico, a different view about our bilateral relationship, and that there were other things more important than anti-communism.

*In the 1990's, the State Department and the Embassy were accused of obstructing investigations or not allowing law enforcement agencies to go further with investiga-*

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<sup>10</sup> Ambassador to Mexico, 1989-1993.

*tions of political corruption in Mexico because of concerns about stability. Were those charges justified?*

I had known about the Drug Enforcement Administration in the United States and I knew that while there were great people within the DEA, there were also cowboys. One thing that I was very sensitive to was the sense of sovereignty in Mexico, so in our very first country team meeting, I basically said, “This is a team and we are going to work as team, we are going to cooperate as a team. If I hear of anybody going around me or not working as a team, I have the authority to send them out. Which I will do.” At that time, the Mexico Embassy was the largest in the world. So we were able to get the DEA, the FBI, the CIA, the DIA, all of the agencies both intelligence and law enforcement, to work together as a team and to share information. There were times that requests were made to do some things that would introduce United States law enforcement into Mexico, which I refused, because I thought it would cause more of a problem. You have to assume that everything you do is going to be on the front page of *The Washington Post* and you have to decide how you would like reading that story. We had good cooperation among the United States law enforcement agencies; the problem was always the Mexican side. United States law enforcement did not trust them because there was so much corruption. I think we had four Mexican attorneys general when I was ambassador. I asked one Mexican attorney how he was finding it, and he said, “I think there are five people in all of the PGR<sup>11</sup> that I can trust.” That’s a hell of an indictment. If that’s the Mexican attorney general’s view, you can imagine what the view was in United States law enforcement in terms of sharing information.

*Tell me about your relationship with Salinas. Did you have access to him?*

Yes, I had access. Salinas was a very, very interesting person, whom I might describe as having one foot in the old system and one foot in the new system, and you never knew which foot it was where. He was very smart. While we worked together well, I don’t think he fully trusted me as the United States.

*In what sense did he not trust you?*

For example, in the elections. One of the objectives I set was to have real democracy introduced as quickly as possible after NAFTA. One of the things that we were insisting on was to have foreign observers. Salinas wanted no foreign observers, and ultimately I forget what name we called it<sup>12</sup>. We came up with a *Kissinger-esque* kind of title to it, but we then encouraged all kinds of observers to come in and view the

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<sup>11</sup> Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office.

<sup>12</sup> “Foreign visitors.”

elections. What we set up to try to help Mexico do I think we achieved, and it was generally perceived that the 1994 presidential elections were honest.

*Were you concerned the opposition would not accept the results?*

I was very quick to call Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas<sup>13</sup> right after the election, because I knew they were having this big rally in the Zócalo to protest the election results. I had a conversation with Cárdenas to basically tell him, “I’ve won elections and I’ve lost elections, and losing elections is never pleasant, but we could not support any kind of a charge that this was a dishonestly or a fraudulently conducted election because we have, from the left to the right, observers looking at it and saying, ‘No, it was fairly conducted.’” I have great admiration for Cárdenas and I think he acted very responsibly.

*Would you say that United States policy directly or indirectly contributed to the democratization of Mexico?*

It was one of my goals to help Mexico achieve real democracy. And what we did, primarily aimed at the 1994 elections but also into the 1997 mid-term elections, was to bring resources from different organizations in the United States and to help some of the NGOs--I particularly remember Alianza Cívica--to monitor the elections and then to encourage monitors from around the world. All those things combined, plus I had continued conversations with all three major political parties to basically make them know where we could help to make sure elections were as honest as possible and that we were neutral--whoever wins, wins. Our interest is in democracy, not in who wins. Through all those things, I think we contributed to having real democracy. I wouldn’t say the United States was the determining factor, because in the final analysis, in this case, the Mexicans themselves wanted honest democracy. But I think we kept up the pressure behind the scenes and called for transparency through election observers, and I think that contributed.

*Did Salinas also mistrust you because he feared that the United States government was looking into corruption in his administration?*

I think he was just basically a very cautious politician, and he was the last of the *priistas* who controlled everything. He saw that we moved around and were pushing this and pushing that in terms of trying to move democracy and in terms of looking into corruption. He was just being a very cautious politician in that he was only candid with what he thought he should be candid with. With Zedillo we had very candid conversations. I don’t believe I ever had a conversation with Salinas

<sup>13</sup> Founder of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

in which he would candidly admit to some shortcoming, whereas with Zedillo I could--and I can also admit to our shortcomings. But I never had one of those candid conversations with Salinas. During the Zapatista uprising and what looked like was going to be crushing the Zapatistas in the old fashioned way, I tried to see Salinas about it and could not get an appointment, which was somewhat unusual. And finally, a few days after the January 1<sup>st</sup> uprising, I brought in some U.S. investors and at the end of the meeting, I asked them to go on and I asked to see Salinas privately. That was the only way I was able to get our point of view across. I told Salinas that if they handled it the old-fashioned way it was going shoot down all of the economic and other gains he had made.

*And what did he say?*

He did not say anything--and that's the thing. We didn't have the kind of dialogue I had with Zedillo. He took it all in and I do think he had a very sanitary effect, because I do know that some calls were made after that meeting to folks like Manuel Camacho<sup>14</sup> and to some others, and they made the right decisions.

*Did your relations with Salinas change after the January 1<sup>st</sup> Chiapas uprising because of disagreements on how to handle the Zapatistas?*

No, I had met Salinas on a couple of occasions when I was head of the American Stock Exchange and I think he knew me as being someone who is open and frank. So I think he respected me, and I certainly respected him in terms of his ability, but it was a more formal kind of relationship. And that was from the time I got there until he left office.

*Could it be that he felt closer to the Bush administration and Ambassador Negroponte?*

Probably so. As a matter of fact, they sort of intervened in our elections in 1992, because it looked like Bush was a surefire winner, and then all of sudden Clinton won and Mexico had to scramble to try to get back in first place with the new Clinton government. The Clinton people thought that Mexico was taking the side of Bush, not doing anything to help Clinton.

*Did you get meetings with either Salinas or Zedillo every time you requested them?*

Yes. Not always immediately. With Zedillo, I could have a meeting or a phone conversation immediately, with one exception.

*Were your interactions with both presidents intense?*

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<sup>14</sup> Foreign Secretary, 1993-1994.

Well, obviously the Chiapas thing with Salinas was fairly intense. With Zedillo it was intense. We had a few late-night meetings during the whole peso devaluation episode and then getting their economy back, and I never saw him discouraged except on one occasion. The one time I couldn't get a meeting with Zedillo--I can't remember the issue--I called Luis Tellez<sup>15</sup>. I said, "Luis, did I say something publicly that pissed off the president? Why am I not getting a meeting?" He said, "He knows what you want to meet about, and he can't say yes and he doesn't want to say no."

*Were the meetings at your initiative or requested by Washington?*

I had free reign; it was very nice. Warren Christopher<sup>16</sup>, Peter Tarnoff<sup>17</sup>, Janet Reno<sup>18</sup> and Ron Brown<sup>19</sup> totally trusted me. And before I left to Mexico, I made the rounds of all the cabinet officers and relevant offices and I told them all that Clinton had told me that if I ever had a problem with bureaucracy to go to him directly, so I didn't have to go to him directly. They trusted me down there. It was nice. I had my own little operation. As I told them all, I never wanted to be an ambassador; I was down there trying to accomplish something, and if they didn't like it I could leave.

*Did you discuss corruption with Salinas, and did Raúl Salinas' arrest come as a surprise?*

No. We had lots of information on Raúl and we had information on other people close to Salinas. We never had any information on (Carlos) Salinas himself. I actually had to have a brief conversation with Salinas about Raúl in terms of the information on his corruption that we had, and that he had to do something about it--that is to say, that he should be considering doing something about it. I never said anybody had to do something; that wasn't our position.

*Did you show Salinas specific information on Raúl?*

The documents on probable corruption which Raúl was involved went to Salinas' staff; I did not hand any documents to Salinas himself. That information was given to his staff and I prefer not to say who that was. After that, somebody

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<sup>15</sup> Chief of Staff of the Office of the Presidency, 1994-1997.

<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State, 1993-1997; died in 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, 1993-1997.

<sup>18</sup> Attorney General, 1993-2001.

<sup>19</sup> Secretary of Commerce, 1993-1996; died in 1996.



at the Embassy told me that Raúl had gone to San Diego and would be out of the country.<sup>20</sup>

*Was the corruption drug-related?*

I don't think so; it was mostly taking a cut for facilitating things that happened.

*You were close to Zedillo and although you didn't stay until the 2000 elections, did he ever mention he was afraid the PRI was going to lose?*

They lost control of the Congress in 1997 before I left. And we never talked in terms of the PRI losing, but Zedillo was very committed to this issue of democracy and he realized that some of the things he was doing were making him unpopular within the PRI. We had conversations about that; it was always impressive to me how he held the line on trying to conduct elections honestly. We talked about that. We talked about the rule of law, and I am convinced that had it not been for the peso devaluation, one of his first acts would have been to reform the Supreme Court. I think his goal was to reform the whole judicial system throughout Mexico. He was very concerned about corruption in law enforcement and in the judiciary. One of the few times I ever saw him frustrated and dejected, we talked about the corruption and he asked what I would do. And I said what I would do had no practicality: "I would put an atomic bomb on top of all of your law enforcement, blow them all up, start all over and not allow any Mexican who has had anything to do with law enforcement in the past to do so in the future." I said that I thought it was so ingrained and such a way of life that to try to change it piecemeal was going to be almost impossible. He agreed.

*Did you give Zedillo a list of people whom the Clinton administration did not want to see in the new government?*

Yes, that was a compilation of people that our intelligence sources felt were corrupt and should not be in high government positions after Zedillo was elected, and yes that was given to him.

*Were there about 12 people?*

I don't remember the precise number, but there were 10 or 15, I think.

*Do you remember who was in the list?*

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<sup>20</sup> Raúl Salinas de Gortari was sent to San Diego in October 1992 and stayed until June 1993, before Jones became ambassador to Mexico.

No, I don't. There was a precise number of names, and I wouldn't want to mention a name and then find out my memory was wrong.

*Did any of them make it to the cabinet or high-level government positions?*

As I recall, there might have been one, but most of them did not. I don't think it was a cabinet position.

*Was Chiapas a surprise?*

It was a surprise.

*Confidential documents from the Defense Intelligence Agency, declassified through the Freedom of Information Act, informed Washington as early as 1993 about armed groups in Chiapas<sup>21</sup>. Were you aware of those reports?*

They knew that they were in several places--in Guerrero, in Oaxaca and in Chiapas, there were small groups of insurgents. Not significant. One of the messages I had to convince Washington of was that this Zapatista uprising was never a destabilizing event. It was somewhat unexpected. It was unexpected that Subcomandante Marcos was a better public communicator than Los Pinos or Washington, but it was never destabilizing to Mexico. We knew those groups; we knew there were pockets in the places where you might expect of these kinds of groups, but nothing that would be destabilizing to Mexico, even after the Zapatista uprising.

*What would have happened if Salinas had used force to repress the Zapatistas?*

If he had used force to repress them, it would have been well covered in the United States. CNN would have been there and investors would have scurried. It was happening at the time that there was slow global conflict news, and it would have been on the front page and the lead of each television network. That would have so scared United States and foreign investors in general that it would have really undermined Salinas' economic reforms, the promise of NAFTA.

*Three months after the Zapatista uprising, Colosio was assassinated. That came as a big shock, I imagine.*

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<sup>21</sup> Six months before the Chiapas uprising, the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala reported to DIA in Washington, D.C that the "URNG leadership has been in contact with a Mexican guerrilla group in the area... tentatively identified as the Zapatista National Liberation (EZLN)." Subject: "IIR A Chiapas Senator requests more military presence to curb guerrilla activity in his State," confidential cable from DIA Washington D.C., dated June 14, 1993, 5 pages, declassified by the Department of States on January 17, 1997, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

That was a surprise and, as a matter of fact, my wife and I were in Los Pinos that evening. The Canadian prime minister was there for a state dinner. We were kept waiting in the receiving room, and we had heard on our way over there that Colosio had been shot. When Salinas came in to the group to say the dinner was cancelled, I saw his face, and I have seen faces of public figures who have been in similar situations, and I'm convinced that Salinas had no advance knowledge that this was going to happen. I am convinced that he was not part of anything like that, as some rumors that were going around suggested.

*Did you have any idea who could have done something like this--the Zapatistas, drug traffickers?*

I didn't know. Colosio had come to be a friend, so my first thoughts were for his family. Subsequent to that, we did offer and we had through the FBI one of those psychological forensic specialists interview the shooter, and he basically reported to me and I reported to Washington that the belief was that this was a lone gunman and was not part of a big conspiracy. It was a deranged fellow.

*What was your main concern when you heard Colosio had been killed? Did you call Washington, and who did you speak to?*

I don't remember. We had phone conversations. I didn't talk to Clinton. I had a lot of conversations with Peter Tarnoff and he was the point person. Janet Reno had a very personal interest in Mexico, so I had those conversations to try to put it in perspective. I personally felt that it was not anything like Mexico was going to go into revolution. I felt that Salinas still had the grip on the country. PRI had the grip of the country; they would come to a solution and stability would be continued.

*So there was not a worst possible scenario that Washington feared coming out of two extraordinary events in the beginning of 1994?*

During that period, I always felt Washington was more hyper about events than I was. On the ground I was hyper about if they used force in Chiapas--that would have been disaster--but most of the time, Washington, as is probably still the case today, was more nervous about what was going on in Mexico than we who were actually living there were.

*And why is that?*

As close neighbors as we are, I was always astounded by how little Washington knew about Mexico, both in Congress and in the administration.

*Within 24 hours after the assassination of Colosio, the Clinton administration opened a \$6 billion line of credit for Mexico to block a run on the peso. Was this a request by Salinas?*

I don't recall that part. I think that was just part of a precautionary thing; I think it might have actually been initiated in Washington.

*Was Mexico an issue in the Situation Room of the White House during the events of 1994?*

I don't recall any special Situation Room meetings on Mexico. There were lots of ongoing discussions leading up to the elections in 1994. I did not get the impression that this was anything destabilizing; it was bad, but it was not destabilizing.

*Did Salinas let you know who he was leaning towards to become his successor?*

No; we got no advance. Salinas was a very secretive guy.

*In the 1950s and 1960s, according to declassified embassy cables, the Mexican president used to inform the U.S. ambassador ahead of time who he would select as his successor.*

The 1950s and 1960s were considerably different than the 1980s and 1990s. I remember for my first trip to Mexico in 1966 to advance the Johnson trip, I had only 10 days. In those days, there were three of us who did the advance: the White House communications director, the secret service and me (when Clinton came to Mexico<sup>22</sup>, there were about 300 people advancing the trip), and I could not get anywhere for the first three days. Luis Echeverría<sup>23</sup> was the interior minister at the time. I could not get through any Mexican cabinet. Our ambassador was Fulton Freeman, a career foreign service guy--very nice guy, but no political sense. And I finally ran into the station chief of the CIA<sup>24</sup>, and I told him that the president was going to be there in a week and I couldn't get anybody to do anything in the Mexican government. And he went to his closet, picked up the phone and called the president of Mexico<sup>25</sup> directly, and everything happened after that. So the 1960s were substantially different than the 1990s.

<sup>22</sup> State visit to Mexico City and Tlaxcala, May 5-7, 1997, first state visit by a U.S. president since Carter in 1979.

<sup>23</sup> President of Mexico, 1970-1976.

<sup>24</sup> Winston Scott, CIA Station Chief, 1956-1969. Scott's legendary power as the "go-to guy" and "the American Proconsul" in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City where the CIA Station was called by the Mexicans the "real embassy" is discussed in *Our Man in Mexico, Winston Scott and the Hidden History of the CIA*, by Jefferson Morley (University Press Kansas, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, 1964-1970; died in 1979.

*So ambassadors no longer get any sort of hint as to who the next president might be?*

It may have started with Salinas, or it may have been with de la Madrid<sup>26</sup>--I'm not sure--but by the time Salinas was there, we got no advance notice.

*Because he did not trust anyone?*

As I used to say about him, he had several balls in the air at the same time and nobody knew which one he was bouncing.

*In terms of the peso, did you make Salinas aware of the risks of an overvalued currency?*

We had been following the reserves situation and the problem was that there was no transparency in the central bank at that time. It was like *Petróleos de México* (Pemex) and the oil reserves. The CIA would try to estimate what the oil reserves were or the Treasury and the CIA would try to estimate what the dollar reserves were, but you never had an accurate number because it was just not transparent. So we did not see the panic happen as it unfolded. We had some information; I don't believe I ever talked to Salinas about it, however.

*In his biography, Robert Rubin<sup>27</sup> blames Salinas for the peso collapse because of his refusal to devalue just before the end of his sexenio.*

There were a lot of things that happened. Obviously Salinas was fully in charge. During the last days of the Salinas administration--during the transition period before the December 1<sup>st</sup> inauguration--we understood that there were significant disagreements between Pedro Aspe<sup>28</sup> and Salinas and the incoming finance minister<sup>29</sup> and Zedillo over what to do about the artificially held peso to the dollar. So ultimately, yes, Salinas was to blame for that.

*What was your role in the aftermath of the peso collapse, when the United States was concerned about Mexico triggering an avalanche in the world financial system?*

I was going to Washington every Monday morning and coming back Friday evening for about a month, because we were trying to see how to put a congressional resolution together, and I was working with Larry<sup>30</sup> and Tim Geithner<sup>31</sup>, David Lipton<sup>32</sup> and Bob Rubin to get a bail-out package. There was skepticism to hostility in Congress about doing anything like this. There was actually resistance at the

<sup>26</sup> Miguel de la Madrid, President of Mexico, 1982-1986; died in 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Robert E. Rubin and Jacob Weisberg, *In an Uncertain World* (Random House 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Secretary of Finance and Public Credit, 1988-1994.

<sup>29</sup> Jaime Serra Puche, served 28 days as Secretary of Finance and Public Credit in December 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Larry Summers, Deputy Secretary of Treasury, 1995-1999.

<sup>31</sup> Deputy assistant secretary for international monetary and financial policy, Treasury Department, 1995-1996.

<sup>32</sup> Treasury Department, Senior Official.

White House at the beginning. George Stephanopoulos<sup>33</sup> and those who were there to protect Clinton's political situation were opposed to any kind of a bail-out. They saw no benefit from it. And I was butting my head against them as well as Congress, and basically my argument was that Mexico was close to bankruptcy. If we let Mexico go bankrupt it would reverberate around all developing countries throughout the world and come back and bite the U.S. in the ass. If that happened, we were going to see a global downturn, particularly in the United States, that was going to be much more politically trying than if he took this U.S. political risk of doing the bail-out.

*In early 1995, Larry Summer and David Lipton traveled secretly<sup>34</sup> to Mexico to meet with Zedillo and try to get assurance that he was firmly committed to economic reforms before committing to the bail-out. Were you in the meeting with Zedillo?*

Three weeks into this whole give-and-take, the White House directed that Larry and I, and I guess David Lipton, fly down to Mexico on a Friday night. The purpose was for them to see firsthand if Zedillo was competent. Larry had a very strong ego and so I was telling Larry on the way down, "You can be confrontational, but the way to be confrontational is to be confrontational but respectful," giving him my take on the way he needed to have this meeting with Zedillo. We went over to Los Pinos to see Zedillo. Very frank conversation. We came out of the meeting and Larry said to me, "Jesus! He is impressive. He can be the central banker or the finance minister of any country in the world." That was the turning point, because then Larry could back and enthusiastically explain to the administration not only my comments about Zedillo's competency and honesty, but that he buttressed that.

*What happened next?*

We had one final thing that we had to get approval on and that was to have, as sort of collateral, Pemex oil revenues that went through the New York Federal Reserve, so if there was a lack of repayment, we had collateral in New York. That was sort of the final piece, and we could then get Congress to pass it ultimately. As I said, I was flying back and forth when I got in on Monday evening and as soon as I got in, Larry was calling me and saying that deliberations between Gingrich<sup>35</sup> and Gephardt<sup>36</sup> had collapsed. We were going to meet with the President and we had to come up with an alternative to deal with this. It was kind of an all-nighter.

<sup>33</sup> Clinton's Senior Advisor on Policy and Strategy, 1993-1996.

<sup>34</sup> Robert E. Rubin and Jacob Weisberg, *In an Uncertain World* (Random House 2004), p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1995-1999.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Gephardt, Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, 1995-2003.

The next morning, we met with the president, and Al Gore <sup>37</sup> was sort of the devil's advocate, the inquisitor, for us. Clinton listened to us and listened to the pros and cons and said, "We'll do it."

*That's when Clinton decided to use the Treasury's Exchange Stabilization Fund? Right.*

*During the negotiations with Congress before the Gephardt-Gingrich talks broke down, there were reports that Mexico was asked to make political concessions around immigration and drug trafficking. Do you recall those conditions?*

No. Those kinds of side deals, if they went on, did not go through me. <sup>38</sup> Immigration had been part of what we were doing with them anyway, and they had done certain things, so that had nothing to do with the bail-out. The main concerns were, do we trust this government to be able to pull it off if they get the bail-out? If they don't pull it off, do we have a way of protecting the U.S. investment in this? And literally the U.S. investment was all there was. Because of the \$30 billion, as I recall, \$17 or \$18 billion was just IMF stuff. It really didn't amount to anything; the real money was the U.S.

*You stayed through all these crises, and when things were calming down you decided to return to the United States. Why?*

They were nice enough to offer me another four years, extend the appointment. If I had been ten years younger I would have done it, but I felt that at that particular age I needed to get back in business and try one more thing; if I waited it might be too late.

*Some ambassadors recommend their successors. Did you?*

I knew Bill Weld<sup>39</sup> and Hillary Clinton were friends. I did not know Bill Weld personally and when I said that I was going to be leaving, basically through Hillary they nominated Bill Weld. When I saw that he was taking on Jesse

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<sup>37</sup> Vice President, 1993-2001.

<sup>38</sup> In a confidential cable the U.S. Embassy in Mexico reported that "Ambassador (Jones) met with President Zedillo Saturday morning (January 21) to review what had happened in Washington that week on the Mexican loan guarantee legislation. Ambassador discussed the law enforcement issues of concern to Congress especially the extradition, narco-trafficking, illegal immigration and prisoner exchange concerns. Ambassador said that there would be action not just promises to move forward in all of these areas in a Zedillo government. He said that he would be coming to Zedillo personally if there was backsliding by Zedillo's administration team." Subject: "Zedillo seeks assurance guarantee will pass," dated January 23, 1995, 5 pages, unclassified by the Department of States on June 23, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> William F. Weld, former Governor of Massachusetts, was nominated by Clinton in July 1997.

Helms<sup>40</sup>, I told him, “This is a kamikaze mission; you’re not going to win against Jesse Helms.” Anyway, I came back because I thought that they would get a new appointment. I guess I came back in July, and then in December I asked to see the president and I said, “It’s really important, particularly in Mexico, that you have an ambassador,” and he asked who would I recommend and I said, “Jeff Davidow<sup>41</sup>.” What was interesting was that in September when I suggested Davidow, the president said it was a great idea, but it took him until the following spring to actually nominate him.

*Has the role of the ambassador changed, and has the relationship changed?*

I think so. The role of the ambassador has always been a tough job because, as Carlos Pascual<sup>42</sup> has found out, there is a very fine line between suggesting ways Mexico can reform itself and telling them how to do it. If you jump over that line of appearing to be sort of a parent rather than a partner, it can cause lots and lots of problems. It probably needs to be much more political now than it was because I think when the United States had a superiority relationship with Mexico, things were done at the presidential level. For Lyndon B. Johnson and Díaz Ordaz, and for Ronald Reagan and his counterparts, I think it was easier in some respects.

*What do you recall from Clinton’s state visit to Mexico in 1997?*

It was as if Clinton had been born a Mexican and lived there all of his life; he adapted to the culture and they liked him. It was a highly successful trip.

*Why did he wait until his second term to visit Mexico?*

That’s a good question. Hopefully he thought it was being well handled down there.

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<sup>40</sup> Republican Senator, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Weld’s nomination was withdrawn by the White House after Helms refused to consider it.

<sup>41</sup> Ambassador to Mexico, 1998-2002.

<sup>42</sup> Ambassador to Mexico, 2009-2011.







**JEFFREY DAVIDOW**

**JEFFREY DAVIDOW** was born January 26, 1944 in Boston, Massachusetts. He received a BA from the University of Massachusetts and an MA from the University of Minnesota. He joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1969 and served as ambassador in Zambia, Venezuela and Mexico. From 1996 to 1998, Davidow was Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Upon his retirement in 2002, he spent a year as a visiting fellow at the JFK School of Government at Harvard University. He is the author of a number of articles and books, including *The Bear and the Porcupine*. From 2003 to 2011 he was President of the Institute of the Americas in La Jolla. He is presently a consultant with the Cohen Group. Davidow was awarded the Order of the Aguila Azteca, Mexico's highest decoration given to a foreigner, and speaks Spanish fluently.

During Davidow's four years as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, President Clinton visited Mérida; Zedillo traveled to Washington for his last working visit; the PRI lost the presidency for the first time in 71 years; Fox and Bush were elected presidents; and Congress put an end to the yearly narcotics certification process. Bush made Mexico his first foreign trip traveling to Guanajuato in February 2001, and Fox paid a state visit to Washington five days before terrorists attacked the United States; Fox canceled a planned visit to Crawford to protest the execution in Texas of a Mexican national; in 2002 Bush and Fox attended a Special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey and launched the U.S.-Mexico Partnership for Prosperity and met again the same year in Los Cabos for the APEC summit meeting .

## 7 / JEFFREY DAVIDOW

1998-2002

Jeffrey Davidow became ambassador to Mexico in July 1998, thirteen months after his predecessor had departed. The Republican-controlled Senate refused to confirm President William J. Clinton's first choice for the post, a political appointee,<sup>1</sup> and the White House neglected to find a viable replacement sooner.<sup>2</sup> When Clinton was forced to narrow his options to career diplomats, Davidow became the ideal second choice: a career foreign service officer who was planning to retire after 34 years in the Foreign Service, and who was America's highest ranking diplomat at the time.<sup>3</sup> When he arrived in Mexico City, U.S.-Mexican relations were at a low point. U.S. law enforcement agents had secretly conducted a sting operation against Mexican banks that deeply irritated President Ernesto Zedillo.<sup>4</sup> Davidow's first task was to restore a sense of direction and get the relationship back on track.

During his four-year service in Mexico, Davidow witnessed from the diplomatic sidelines Mexico's most dramatic change in recent history: the end of 71 years of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the election of the center-right National Action Party (PAN) opposition candidate Vicente Fox to the presidency in 2000. In 2001, he was asked by President George W. Bush to remain in the post, making him one of two ambassadors in three decades to have represented both Democratic and Republican presidents in Mexico. He is also the only American ambassador to have served during both PRI and PAN administrations.

Davidow spent much of his first years in Mexico trying to keep Washington "from doing stupid things," such as decertifying the Zedillo administration's coun-

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<sup>1</sup> William F. Weld, former governor of Massachusetts, was nominated by Clinton in July 1997, but withdrew from consideration after it became clear that he was not going to be ratified by the Senate.

<sup>2</sup> Ambassador Jim Jones personally discussed with President Clinton the importance of not leaving the embassy without ambassador for a long time and recommended Davidow as his successor. Still, the decision was delayed for close to a year. See interview with Jones.

<sup>3</sup> He holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador.

<sup>4</sup> President of Mexico, 1994-2000.

ternarcotics efforts. He was convinced that a vote of non-confidence for a country so closely linked to the United States would be self-defeating. The DEA's open hostility toward Mexico was so concerning that Davidow stopped reporting sensitive information to Washington, fearing it could be leaked to the press and used by Congress to decertify Mexico. Following the landmark 2000 presidential election, Davidow was instrumental in organizing the first Fox-Bush meeting in Guanajuato in early 2001 and Fox's state visit to Washington later on. The euphoria surrounding these meetings by two newly inaugurated presidents with shared political and ideological views helped set the stage for what was thought to be the beginning of a new era of friendship and trust between the distant neighbors. Fox asked Washington to "negotiate" a comprehensive bilateral immigration agreement, but there was no political will or desire in the Bush administration or in Congress to reform U.S. immigration laws to please the incoming Mexican president. If this was the case before the terrorist attacks of 9/11—an event that radically changed America's foreign policy priorities in the world—it was much more so after. As a result, in his last year in Mexico, Davidow saw the deterioration of the relationship between the presidents and the two countries. Fox and Bush drifted further apart as Mexico, at the time a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, refused to endorse U.S. plans to invade Iraq.

Davidow's Mexican experience inspired him to do what none of his predecessors had done so far: write a timely and insightful book on the United States and Mexico. *The Bear and the Porcupine*<sup>5</sup> is a book about his experience as U.S. ambassador, he says in the preface, and a memoir only to the degree that personal experience is used to explain the nature of the complex U.S.-Mexican relationship. Davidow offers a rare look into the behind-the-scenes dealings of a highly secretive and often contentious relationship. In the words of one reviewer, "It is one of the most candid and sometimes humorous recent accounts of how ignorant and intrusive American officials don't mix well with prickly Mexicans who seem convinced that Washington spends much of its time plotting ways to undermine Mexico's sovereignty."

Surrounded by Mexican paintings, popular art, and books, I interviewed Davidow in June 2011 at his offices at the Institute of the Americas, at the University of California in La Jolla. During our long conversation, he spoke with the same openness and honesty that characterizes the narrative of his book.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Davidow, *The Bear and the Porcupine* (Markus Weiner Publishers Princeton, 2007).

*Why were you nominated to be ambassador to Mexico?*

Jim Jones had said he wanted to leave, but the White House did nothing to look for a replacement until he finally left. They found Weld, who they liked because he was a Republican and he had been very helpful on the NAFTA debate. But the White House nominated Weld without talking first to Jesse Helms.<sup>6</sup> It became apparent that Weld was not going to get the job, and they looked for other potential political types and then finally realized that it was getting too long. That's when they decided to send a career person. In some ways, I was sort of the logical person; I was already serving as head of the Latin American Bureau.

*So it didn't surprise you?*

It surprised me in the sense that they made the decision to go for a career person, but if they were going to go for a career person, I would have been one of the candidates. I had a good relationship with Madeleine Albright<sup>7</sup> and Sandy Berger<sup>8</sup> and the president.

*Who informed you?*

Sandy called and said, "You want to go to Mexico?" I said "OK," and he said, "Just OK?" And I said, "Yeah." I had been thinking of retiring at that point.

*What was your relation with President Clinton?*

It wasn't a very full relationship. I probably sat in on maybe a dozen meetings. He knew my name. Don't believe people in Washington who tell you, "Oh, yes, I had a great relationship with the president." There are very few people in Washington who have great relations with the president; we all work for him.

*Did you meet Clinton before going down there, and did he give you specific instructions?*

No, I don't think I met with the president before I went down. I knew what had to be done. Certainly I met with Albright and Sandy, but I was meeting with them all of the time anyhow. You get a general statement of instructions, but it's not very specific.

*How would you describe Clinton's policy toward Mexico?*

Clinton had run for office in 1992 against NAFTA. It was one of the criticisms he made against George Bush, father. Then he came into office at the beginning of 1993 and flipped, because he's a sensible human being and he realized it made

<sup>6</sup> Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, who blocked Weld's confirmation.

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State, 1997-2001.

<sup>8</sup> National Security Advisor, 1997-2001.

sense to have a good relation with Mexico and to expand trade. All of the presidents understand this--Clinton, Bush, Obama. The limitation on increased free trade agreements never comes from the White House; it comes from Congress and the Democratic Party, which is very much concerned about labor and the power of the labor unions. So Clinton did a courageous thing at the outset of his administration, but having done that he did not take it much further. I think when NAFTA was signed and went into effect there was great hope that there would be even more efforts at integration. My feeling is that Clinton made a heroic decision, used a lot of political chips to get NAFTA passed and then sort of relaxed. At the same time we were having major problems on the border. Then the narcotics issue was another issue.

*You took over the Embassy in the midst of great tensions due to the Casablanca sting operation against Mexican banks. Did you have to apologize when you arrived?*

I don't know if I ever went and specifically apologized, but the whole thrust was "What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" We got involved in a lot of negotiations. It was a very difficult situation, very poorly handled by the U.S., but that was only part of an ongoing problem between the drug agencies in the U.S. and Mexico.

Zedillo was upset because it had been very poorly managed. It did not have to be that big a problem; if we had gone to Zedillo two days before we announced it and said, "We have been running a joint program with the Mexicans," he would have accepted it there.

*You are referring to the lack of trust between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies?*

That really was the most difficult part of my job, trying to be the intermediary between Washington and Mexico, and law enforcement agencies in Washington and the Mexican government. You had people in Washington like the head of the DEA<sup>9</sup> and the whole DEA structure that were very, very anti-Mexican. This dates from the time of Camarena.<sup>10</sup> There was a lot of evidence that many times when the DEA would try to work with Mexican officials, the information would be leaked, and the operation would be blown. The real tension for me--the most difficult part of my job--was trying to keep Washington, especially DEA, from being openly hostile to Mexico. And they would use their contacts on the Hill, and every time something went wrong in Mexico they would leak it. Meanwhile, at the same time

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Constantine, DEA Administrator, 1994-1999.

<sup>10</sup> Enrique Camarena, DEA agent killed in Guadalajara in 1985.

in Mexico, there was in the press and the Congress great opposition to working with the *gringos* because of *Casablanca* and other things. There were many things--this is pre Wikileaks--I would not report to Washington because I was always afraid that anything negative in my reports would be leaked by the DEA to Congress and the press. I did not lie, but I was very careful in what I wrote and what I allowed the people in my embassy to write.

*What kinds of things wouldn't you report?*

Well, if somebody came to me and said "I hear that Governor So-and-So is crooked," my response always was to say, "That's interesting; you got proof?" Because in Mexico all of the politicians and the various police forces--the PGR, the Army, CISEN--would use the issue of drugs as a way of *tachar con los gringos* their opponents. So it was a very dirty business. Then, on a personal level, I would say something either fairly innocuous or somewhat critical about drugs, like in 1998, when I said, "You are going to have a major problem in Mexico." It was somewhat misquoted, but I was not always careful and I got hammered by the Mexican press. I said to myself--and this is very petty, very personal--"I spend all my time defending you bastards from the DEA and this is how I get paid by being squeezed here?" So it was often, on a personal level, a very conflicted situation.

*Did you discuss DEA's anti-Mexican attitude with Washington?*

I discussed it with State and Berger, but they weren't going to go after Constantine because he had this old base of support. The White House defended itself against charges from the Republicans that it was not doing enough about the border and about drugs by having a really tough guy at the head of the DEA. I really did not trust DEA, and sometimes FBI.

*All this had to do with certification?*

Exactly. On the one hand my view was that we always had to certify Mexico. Sometimes the White House and the State Department would talk a tough game and say, "Maybe this year we won't," but it was always apparent to me that we had to certify Mexico because we did not want to get into the position where the limited cooperation we were getting would be jeopardized. So my yearly cable on why we should certify Mexico was always very positive, saying we've made progress in a range of areas. Whereas in Washington, DEA, the FBI, and Congress would say, "There is no change; the situation is bad and getting worse." So that was the tension.



*Your feeling was that Mexico was too big to be decertified regardless of other considerations?*

It would have been self-defeating. There were people who said, “You want to certify because you don’t want to have a blow-up and because decertifying Mexico would have such a negative effect not only on drug cooperation, but for United States investment in Mexico.” But there were also some important people who said, “The situation is not getting better. The hell with it, let’s decertify Mexico.” There were people who said we think we should have a big blow-up and maybe for a year or three years things would be bad, but it just might be what Mexico needs to get serious about really doing something about drugs. There were people in the State Department who said, “Look, we are fighting this battle against our Congress for the Mexicans but maybe the best thing to do for the Mexicans is to let things really get bad.” That argument did not win and we never decertified. This was the pressure that I was under because the people on the Hill who wanted to decertify were always looking for opportunities in my reporting or of evidence in my public speeches that Mexico should be decertified.

*Did you discuss it with Zedillo?*

I would have conversations with Liébane Sáenz.<sup>11</sup> Whether I ever sat down directly with Zedillo and discussed the issue, I cannot remember. But this was not secret stuff. It was understood. People like Zedillo understood what was going on. They cared a great deal about certification. There were people who were working very hard to make the situation better.

*Was Mexico the key to getting rid of certification?<sup>12</sup>*

Maybe, it was certainly important. There were also problems with Colombia all the time, and it was seen by all of Latin America as an insult and it wasn’t doing any good.

*How was your relationship with Zedillo?*

I had great respect for Zedillo. I thought he was a very good president. I never doubted his honesty. I thought he was a good administrator and that he had a good understanding of what the relationship with the United States should be. I think he had difficulties with a variety of issues like drugs, because the government did not have the capacity, and in some cases the will, to do more.

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<sup>11</sup> President Zedillo’s Chief of Staff.

<sup>12</sup> Introduced by Congress in 1986, the drug certification process required the Federal Government to annually identify countries that were cooperating or not cooperating with U.S. counter-narcotic efforts. In 2002, Congress de facto eliminated the counter-narcotics certification process.

*Did you meet frequently with him?*

I did not have that kind of relationship with Zedillo or Fox. Presidents don't get that deeply involved. Maybe it's a question of personality. I did not feel I had to meet with Zedillo every week; my ego did not demand it, but my job demanded that I let Los Pinos know that I had a particular point or a problem or needed to have a discussion and that, to me, was very important. If I really needed to meet with them, I could get the meeting, but I had very good relationships pretty much with everyone else that I needed to. I cannot remember very many times when I would request a meeting with anybody that they would say no.

*In 2000, did you doubt Zedillo would allow fair elections?*

I never doubted him. I knew he was concerned because I was talking to people around him. It's difficult for a president to reveal himself to a foreign ambassador. I don't think he was going to reveal his self-doubts to me because I then would have told Washington and Washington would have--in his mind--thought less of him. But the people around Zedillo and I had good conversations, and I was absolutely convinced from day one that if Fox won he would be the winner.

*Were you concerned the dinosaurs would try to keep the PRI in power regardless of the results, and did you send them a message about fair elections?*

I don't think the dinosaurs had a well-thought-out plan themselves for election night. I never saw any evidence that they were well enough organized to overcome the IFE<sup>13</sup> and I had great faith in the IFE. The way we send messages in a situation like that is by constantly reaffirming our strong belief that there will be free and fair elections. You don't go in and say, "There better be a free and fair election." When a politician would say, "There are going to be free and fair elections," our response would be "Oh, good, we are in complete agreement."

*Were you confident the PAN would win?*

I didn't know the PAN was going to win. My thinking was that either Labastida<sup>14</sup> would win by a very small amount or that Fox would win by a significant amount, which is what happened. When the PAN won we didn't go out and say, "Oh, the one-party system is over." We said there had been a free and fair election and the PAN won. I think a lot that happened in the election had to do with changes in the Mexican society and the loss of the PRI's overwhelming control of the country-

<sup>13</sup> Federal Electoral Institute, Mexico's autonomous electoral body responsible for organizing federal elections.

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Labastida, PRI's presidential candidate in 1994.

side. I thought in my gut that Fox would win but I also thought there was a chance Labastida could win because of the *maquinaria*.

*Did the 2000 elections help change the perception that the United States did not pressure Mexico to open up its political system during most of the 71 years of the PRI because it preferred stability over democracy?*

The results of the election were very well received in the United States. Like most of the democratic world, we looked at it and said, "Yeah, this is good. *Alternancia* is good." But that doesn't mean that prior to the election we were pushing for that goal. We were pushing for the goal of a free, transparent election that could allow that to happen or could allow the PRI or the PRD to win. But there is a difference between support for free elections without regard to who will win and intromission into the process to pick a candidate. I do think there was a general view throughout the world that something historic had happened in Mexico and that this was good for Mexico, probably good for the United States, but I do not believe that the United States was in any way a player in making that happen.

*Did the United States benefit from the outcome of the election?*

The U.S. probably morally benefitted from it. But you know the U.S. generally deals with governments as they exist. As change came to Mexico--which was essentially a change that developed first in Baja California in the 1980's and then changes that came about because of NAFTA--American and other foreign investors demanded more honest government and cleaner accounts and more transparency. All those things led to a situation which culminated in the year 2000. I suspect that over the years we probably put up with a lot in Mexico because we really didn't see levers or mechanisms for domestic change. As Mexico started to change, some of our actions helped that. Probably at times we turned a blind eye to what happened, like Tlatelolco in 1968 and Corpus Christi in 1971,<sup>15</sup> but there was a real *parteaguas* (turning point) after the Cold War.

*Did you also turn a blind eye to corruption?*

Corruption was a continuing problem for Mexico and not so much a problem for the United States because, for instance, American investors and businesses generally were not subject to very much corruption. If an American company wants to build a factory in the *estado of huitlacoche*, generally they get help from the gov-

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<sup>15</sup> Tlatelolco (1968) and Corpus Christi (1971) referred to the massacres of student and civilian protesters by government forces and army elites in Mexico City.

ernment, not squeezed for money. If a Mexican company wants to build a factory, then it can be different.

*Why did the Clinton Administration stop investigations of prominent Mexicans suspected of corruption instead of developing cases?*

I don't believe that. When we got information about people involved in drugs in the United States, if it was hard information we would take action, but most of what we would get is limited--keep in mind, our ability to run investigations inside Mexico is and was hard. The only time that I was aware that we actually stopped an investigation, or paused an investigation, was when it looked like political forces in Mexico were using us to go after another politician. Even before I went to Mexico, when I was still Assistant Secretary, the PRI came to the U.S. government and said Monreal<sup>16</sup> was a crook. Janet Reno<sup>17</sup> called me and said, "What should we do? The election in Zacatecas is five days from now; if we make a big thing out of this we will be interfering in the election." I said, "Look, if the guy is involved in drugs, he will be involved five days from now just as he is now. Let's not get caught in a trap." So Monreal won and we never heard another word. My view on intelligence was: is this too convenient? But I don't think we consciously pulled back. We had problems, especially under the PRI, because of the network of collaboration that existed within the PRI.

*What do you mean?*

I'll give you an example--and I don't blame Zedillo for this. Everybody knew that Mario Villanueva<sup>18</sup> was a crook and that he was involved in narcotics, and we had information on that and we gave that information to the government, but to go after Mario Villanueva would have meant that the PRI would have had to get a *desafuero*. They waited until he left office. He was in Quintana Roo. Then he went to Yucatan where Cervera Pacheco<sup>19</sup> helped him. There was an unwillingness, not because people were trying to protect Villanueva, but because they were trying to protect the PRI. So that made it difficult. We would have difficulty getting and verifying information.

*It can be puzzling that after decades and piles of information compiled by U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies on many Mexican politicians, very few have actually been prosecuted.*

<sup>16</sup> Ricardo Monreal, PRI governor of Zacatecas, 1998-2004.

<sup>17</sup> Attorney General, 1993-2001.

<sup>18</sup> Governor of Quintana Roo, 1993-1999, extradited to the U.S. on drug-related criminal charges in 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Cervera Pacheco, two-time governor of Yucatán; died in 2004.

There was always suspicion, but deal with something like Jorge Hank Rhon.<sup>20</sup> The crime that he was accused of by the DEA did not have anything to do with drugs. It had to do with importing threatened animals, but they couldn't prove it. First, very few people know who's doing what. If you're a cartel leader and you're paying off a state governor, you don't make that public, you're careful about it. And unless the cartel leader is willing to confess, it's going to be hard to get that information. And if you are limited in the number of agents you can have in the country, whether they can be armed, whether they can have wiretaps or not, then it's very hard to run an investigation that can prove something. You can have suspicions, but you have to be careful about the suspicions because they are often politically motivated. I think there were various kinds of corruption and I think it's probably gotten worse. I think there was a kind of corruption that existed in the 1980's and 1990's in which a governor might say to the cartel, "Look, I'm not going to come after you if you promise not to kill anyone in my state. Do whatever you have to do peacefully and I will look the other way." That's corruption, but it's a different kind of corruption than, "You give me a million dollars a loaf." But in all cases it's not so easy to prove. Proof needed for criminal convictions is very elusive.

*The U.S. knows how to build cases, but they didn't want to do it in the Hank case.*

It would have required a major investment of time and resources in opposition to and in violation to the agreements we had with the Mexican government. After Humberto Alvarez Machaín,<sup>21</sup> we were very limited in the number of people we could have there, and they were not supposed to carry arms. It's very difficult to run an investigation, so we were always dependent on getting information from the Mexicans. I think this has changed a lot. When I was ambassador, we had a limit of I think 68 DEA agents in the country. It was minimal and it was very dangerous for them to do things independently.

*You remained ambassador when Bush came to office. Were there differences between Clinton's and Bush's policies toward Mexico?*

Yes. I had met Bush before when he was still governor. Bush in many ways was a typical Texas politician. Texans really think they understand Mexico; some do, some don't. It comes from growing up eating tamales and *huevos rancheros*; politicians in California don't eat *huevos rancheros*, so they don't think they understand Mexico. He had an interest in Mexico. He was actually pretty knowledgeable about

<sup>20</sup> Mayor of Tijuana, 2004-2007.

<sup>21</sup> Mexican medical doctor accused of torturing DEA agent Camarena in 1985. He was kidnapped in 1990 by bounty hunters hired by DEA agents and brought to the U.S. for trial. He was acquitted and sent back to Mexico. As a result, President Salinas issued new rules further limiting DEA's activities in Mexico.

a lot of issues relating to Mexico's water, border crossings and so forth because he had been governor. For him Mexico was really the only foreign country he felt comfortable dealing with; he had, like many Texas politicians, an underlying affection for Mexico. Part of Texas culture is Mexican culture. He felt that how he treated Mexico would be perceived in the rest of Latin America as an indication of great American interest in Latin America, because the Latin Americans are always complaining about how we don't pay enough attention. So there was a real difference, and right from the very start Bush wanted to improve relations with Mexico. It was symbolic of his foreign policy, and that's why the first trip he made just six weeks after he took over was to Guanajuato. Clinton, on the other hand, was tied up in a whole web of international affairs. He was not hostile to Mexico, but for Bush it was something very exciting. That did not last long, but for the first few months it was almost euphoria.

*What went wrong between Bush and Fox?*

I think what happened was the situation began with a lot of euphoria. Actually, on the part of Fox and Bush, a certain amount of innocence. I really do think they were ingenuous thinking they could accomplish a lot more. But things started to fall apart very quickly after the Guanajuato meeting on immigration. There was no consensus in Washington, and there were a number of reasons for that. You had a very conservative Justice Department under John Ashcroft.<sup>22</sup> The INS had no leader at the beginning. State Department never really could carry the day. I remember talking to Colin Powell<sup>23</sup> and trying to explain to him some of the specifics. This is complicated stuff. Powell would go blank, and he was very pro-immigrant. Then as it became apparent that we were not going to be able to deliver something--the Mexicans kept saying that we were having a "negotiation." It wasn't a negotiation, because there was absolutely nothing the Mexicans could bring to the table. Then we ran into being pressured publicly by Jorge Castañeda<sup>24</sup> in June. "We want everything," he said, "the whole enchilada." Even when Bush tried to do some things that would have been positive, Castañeda blocked it. Talk about intromission.

*What did Castañeda block?*

There was a time when we could have changed one element of the immigration law that would have given as many as 500,000 people living in the United States the opportunity to get their green cards, and Castañeda went to the Democrats

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Attorney General, 2001-2005.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Secretary of State, 2001-2005.

<sup>24</sup> Mexican Foreign Minister, 2000-2003.

on the Hill and said, “Don’t do it, because if you allow them to do something, then they will never do the whole thing.” Bush was very angry about that. Then Castañeda came to Washington and Powell told him, “Jorge, this talk about the full enchilada, it’s not helping us.” That’s why as he was walking out of the State Department and was probably talking to you (the press), Castañeda said, “Well, if not the full enchilada, maybe chilaquiles.” Then Fox came up the first week of September for the state visit. Bush was still trying, and we had explained to Fox, but at the opening ceremony, on the White House lawn, Fox said, “We will have an agreement by the end of the year.” And everybody went, “Where the hell did he get that?!” In the meantime, Castañeda pulled Mexico out of the Rio Treaty, which became a big issue a week later because we used the treaty to get rhetorical support from Latin America after 9/11.

*Did you get along with Castañeda?*

I think he felt that I was not as smart as he. Well, nobody’s as smart as Jorge. And secondly, when I would tell Jorge, “This isn’t going to work” --whatever his idea was--I don’t think he believed that I was speaking for the administration. I think he just thought I was being negative.

*To what extent was Mexico’s membership on the UN Security Council a factor?*

I left before things got really ugly in the Security Council. That was another thing. Jorge announced the day Fox took over that Mexico was going to go for a seat on the Security Council. Of course, the PRI had generally avoided being on the Security Council because they understood the dangers, and when I heard this, I was at a meeting of businessmen. I was asked, “What do you think about Mexico joining the Security Council?” and I said, “I think it’s a really bad idea.” Andres Rozental<sup>25</sup> was there. I’m sure he told Jorge. I said, “This will bring Mexico into conflict with the United States,” and it did. I think Castañeda felt that by being on the Security Council, Mexico would have more chips (for dealing with immigration), but it doesn’t work that way.

*Did Castañeda link Mexico’s vote in the Security Council to immigration?*

All of that came after I left. I know at one point, we were having a drink one night and he said that we should have a big agreement, a big consensus, which was: we find a way to open up our oil sector, and you find a way to open up immigration. I said, “That would be nice, but how do you think that’s going to happen? They’re not connected. There’s no trade there and these issues have to

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<sup>25</sup> Castañeda’s half-brother and member of Mexico’s Foreign Service.

do with domestic politics in the United States and Mexico.” Jorge is a gigantic thinker. I give him credit. He’s not necessarily wrong in what he wants to see. I was always much more pragmatic: how are we going to make that kind of trade, given the sensitivities in Mexico about oil and the sensitivities in the United States about immigration?

*Do you still think it’s a bad idea for Mexico to be on the Security Council?*

I think it is as Mexico tries to pick and choose how it gets involved in international affairs. For instance, Brazil clearly wants to be a permanent member on the Security Council, which I don’t think is going to happen soon, but Brazil is a very active member of the United Nations; it’s Brazil that has carried Haiti. Mexico has had very distinguished individual United Nations international diplomats, but Mexico is a non-actor in peacekeeping. I mean, this is a large, important nation that somehow thinks that trying to stop genocide in Rwanda is an act of intromission. I’m sorry, that’s not the way it is. It’s not fair to say that a country should not have a seat on the Security Council; if they want it, they can have it, but they should realize they are limited.

*What does it mean to have a special relation with Mexico?*

First, the term special relationship is nice rhetoric, but there is no question that we deal with Mexico with a lot more interest and seriousness than we deal with most other countries. There is a special relationship because Mexico is too important to us. It doesn’t mean that we love each other or that Mexico is going to do everything to help the United States or the United States is going to do everything to help Mexico, but there is a general recognition that we cannot afford to derail the relationship. It doesn’t mean that we always accept the Mexican position, but it does mean that we are far more conscientious and generally more willing to help within government to the degree that we can. Pick another country in Latin America. If that country disappears into the ocean, it doesn’t really matter to the United States, but we do have to maintain Mexico because geography is destiny. You cannot ignore your neighbors, especially when your neighbors are countries that have a great many problems.

*Is this why Washington tolerates more criticism, which sometimes can be unfair, against Mexico?*

Yes, because within the United States there is a strong tendency--not the dominant tendency, but a strong tendency--to react negatively to Mexico, and successive administrations have always tried to *amortiguar* that possible negative reaction.



Defending Mexico can be a vulnerability for an administration, because people who are against Mexico for one reason or another (now, its drugs and immigration) will use those issues politically against the administration. It can be tough.

*What do you make out of many Mexicans, including the government, constantly accusing the U.S. of trying to intervene or control Mexico?*

We don't respond. There's an old saying in Washington: "Even elephants have fleas." I think there is a general understanding, for which we do not usually get credit, that in our relations with Mexico, we have to be very concerned about Mexico's super sensitivities about sovereignty and other questions. For instance this is why the United States government never says anything about Mexico's absolutely ridiculous energy policies. Because we realize that if the U.S. government says, "Hey why don't you guys wake up and understand you're running out of oil? Your budget depends on oil—you're going to have a disaster." That would only serve the interests of those who are against any sort of change. Mexico, on the other hand, is probably more critical of the United States or is more involved in openly commenting on U.S. actions. For instance, the Mexican government has taken a very strong stand on the Arizona law SB 1070.<sup>26</sup> I think if the U.S. government was to see something really bad in the State of Michoacán, for instance, we probably would not comment on that publicly.

*Would you call this Mexican intervention?*

People in Mexico always talk about the asymmetry. The asymmetry, in my view, has always worked to Mexico's advantage, not disadvantage. The kind of intrusion into domestic issues in the United States on the part of Mexico is really quite significant, and we put up with it. If Mexico wants to defend an immigrant that has been hurt by the police as part of its consular responsibilities, sure, that's its responsibility and that's what we would do if an American were thrown in jail in Cancún. But it's doubtful that we would make a comment about the entire law or juridical process of Mexico in the same way that Mexico involves itself in the United States.

*Why do you put up with it?*

We put up with it because we really want to see Mexico succeed, not because we're altruistic, but because it's good to have a strong, economically sound democracy on our border rather than a country that's falling apart or a country run by a dictator.

*Have there been changes in attitudes toward the U.S.?*

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<sup>26</sup> A state law to criminalize illegal immigration.

I think so, but it's often difficult in Mexican politics, because a certain level of *anti-gringuismo* is expected of all Mexican politicians. It's just there. Like during the Cold War, in the United States, all politicians had to be anti-Soviet.

*How were you treated by the Mexicans?*

Even politicians, or academics, who understand that the role of the United States in 2011 is different than the role of the United States in 1912 or 1933 or 1950, cling to the idea that the American ambassador is an important *personaje* and is a channel for them to Washington. I think Mexican politicians think the American ambassador is more important than the American ambassador really is. I would meet with Mexican politicians all the time: every morning I had breakfast with someone, or lunch. I very rarely reported it; I didn't see any point in doing that.

*In the 1990s, one of the breakthroughs in the bilateral relation was to try to compartmentalize issues and prevent any one issue from contaminating the entire agenda. How successful has it been?*

This is the continual battle. You cannot allow one issue to control everything; there's a lot of business that has to be taken care of.

*How would you define the role of the American ambassador in Mexico?*

The job is like an accordion: there are ambassadors who spread the accordion and try to do everything, and there are others who try to keep it narrow. I tried to do everything. But there are certain elements to being an ambassador. One is crisis management: when there is a problem, nobody else really can handle it and bring all the resources to play, other than the ambassador. Secondly, you have to be a leader of a very large and complicated diplomatic mission with dozens of government agencies. I think one of the things I tried to do with some success was to get people working together. When I got to Mexico, the DEA would not talk with the CIA and the FBI would not share information with the CIA. The ambassador also has to be the public face of the U.S. government in Mexico. Sometimes I did it well, sometimes I did not do it well; I think I was too open. It's very important to control the message, and I would often lose control of that. But for me, the biggest job was keeping Washington aware of what was feasible, what could be done, what could be accomplished, how it could be accomplished--and that was why I tried to be very active. Also, I had an important role in supervising, not only getting agencies to cooperate. A lot of the work of an ambassador, or any leader, is keeping people from doing really stupid things. I would almost on a weekly basis have either the head of the DEA or the head of the FBI in the Embassy come in and

see me, and they would say, “You know, my bosses in Washington want me to do this.” And I would say, “That’s really stupid.” And they would say, “Yes, I know, but I cannot tell them because they’re my boss.” And I would say, “You tell them that that son-of-a-bitch ambassador refuses to give permission.” So there are multiple things that an ambassador does.

*To what extent are ambassadors part of Washington’s policymaking process?*

To say that an ambassador is not involved in policymaking is not true. The fact of the matter is that for most of the time, policy is incremental; it’s not very dramatic. Most of the time, in mature relationships, it’s step by step, and the input of the ambassador in the embassy can be very important. Another thing I thought very important that other ambassadors don’t care about, is everything related to consular work. Visas, for instance: we saw 2 million people a year, and to me how those people were treated was very important. Twenty-five percent of all U.S. Consular officers in the world work in Mexico--mostly young people, mostly very intelligent. How they are treated by their bosses is very important for the foreign service.

*Was Mexico your most challenging post?*

Definitely. It was in some ways the most enjoyable post because I love traveling in Mexico--I really enjoy Mexican culture and Mexican people--but the pressure can be immense.



**ANTONIO O. GARZA JR.**

**ANTONIO O. GARZA, JR.** was born on July 7, 1959 in Brownsville, Texas. After receiving a Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Texas and a Doctor of Jurisprudence from Southern Methodist University School of Law, he was elected Cameron County Judge in 1988 and was reelected in 1990. In 1994, he was appointed secretary of state and liaison to Mexican and border affairs by Texas Governor George W. Bush. In 1998, he was elected railroad commissioner, becoming the first Hispanic Republican elected to statewide office in Texas. He held the post until his nomination as ambassador to Mexico. Garza serves as counsel in the Mexico City office of White & Case and is a partner of Vianovo, a management and communications consultancy. He currently lives in Mexico City. Garza was awarded the Order of the Águila Azteca, Mexico's highest decoration given to a foreigner.

During Garza's six years and two months as ambassador to Mexico, Fox accepted Bush's invitation to visit his Texas ranch in Crawford to smooth out tensions around Iraq; Bush was reelected in 2004 and Calderón was elected in 2006; Calderón made fighting organized crime the cornerstone of his public policy and Bush asked Congress for a multimillion-dollar security assistance aid package for Mexico; between 2005 and 2008, the heads of state of the U.S., Mexico, and Canada held five North American leaders summits in Waco, Cancun, Ottawa, Montebello, and New Orleans; Bush signed into law a bill to build a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexico border to curb illegal immigration; Bush failed twice to convince Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill; Bush and Calderón met in Mérida; and Barack Obama was elected president.

## 8 / ANTONIO O. GARZA JR.

2002-2009

Antonio O. Garza, Jr. was nominated ambassador to Mexico in July of 2002 and presented credentials that November. In handpicking a longtime Texas political ally, friend and confidant, President George W. Bush was sending the message that although the September 11 terrorist attacks sent Mexico to the back burner of American foreign policy priorities, he remained committed to forging a strong partnership with the neighboring country. Garza's direct access to the White House made Mexicans feel important again and spared Bush's political appointee from the unwelcome bashing experienced by most of his predecessors. Mexicans hailed Garza's roots—all four of his grandparents came from Mexico—and were pleased that he knew Spanish and was familiar with their culture from living on the Texas border. In announcing his decision, Bush said that Tony, as he is known, “has an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the United States and Mexico.”<sup>1</sup>

But Garza arrived in Mexico at a time when the once-promising relationship had soured around Washington's unwillingness to push for comprehensive immigration reform, President Vicente Fox's top foreign policy priority. His arrival also coincided with the height of bilateral tensions resulting from the Fox administration's refusal to support an American-sponsored United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing a military attack on Iraq. Mexico was a key non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and Washington was desperate to get it on board to try to reverse its opposition to the war. These events marked a turning point that Garza did little to improve as he adopted a more outspoken demeanor against Fox's inability to reduce drug-related violence along the Texas border. In 2005, he took the unusual step of closing down the consulate in Nuevo Laredo for a week<sup>2</sup> “to punish the Mexican government for its failure to control violence in

<sup>1</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush to nominate Antonio Garza to be Ambassador of the United States to Mexico,” July 16, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico, “The U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo will be closed,” Press Release 05, July 29, 2005.

the region.”<sup>3</sup> The undiplomatic statement infuriated the Fox administration. The State Department responded by saying that Garza regretted his choice of words.<sup>4</sup> Garza also sent a letter to Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez, which the U.S. Embassy made available to the Mexican press,<sup>5</sup> sharply criticizing the government because of the rising violence and expressing concern for the sudden increase in the number of Americans killed and attacked on the Mexican side of the border. Tensions lasted for the remainder of Fox’s term.

In 2005, Garza married María Asunción Aramburuzabala, a Mexican millionaire, owner of the Corona beer company. The wedding was held in Valle del Bravo, a popular weekend getaway for Mexico City’s affluent upper class, and was attended by First Lady Laura Bush and billionaire Carlos Slim. The newlyweds were invited by the Bushes to visit the White House and stayed in the iconic Lincoln Room. While some welcomed the union as “good for the relationship,” others noted that the marriage, an unprecedented event in the annals of diplomacy, coincided with Garza’s decision—apparently made on his own—to become more outspoken about Mexico’s security failures that he said were hurting business and investment. Garza denied that his marriage to Mexico’s richest woman was influencing his job and rejected veiled suggestions for him to resign.<sup>6</sup> He and Aramburuzabala divorced in 2009.

The 2006 inauguration of President Felipe Calderón brought fresh blood to the relationship. While Garza’s first four years as ambassador were marked by disagreements around Iraq and public grievances with Fox’s second foreign minister, there was a significant shift with the incoming administration. The Bush administration hailed Calderón’s tough stance against organized crime. When the new president demanded that the United States do its part in the war on drugs, Bush responded by endorsing a new sense of “shared responsibility” and launching the Mérida Initiative, a multimillion-dollar security assistance aid package for Mexico and Central America. Garza became closer to Calderón than he had ever been with Fox. There was little in Calderón’s policies for Washington to disagree with or criticize. Security cooperation reached unprecedented levels. A “secret” diplomatic cable published by the anti-secrecy group Wikileaks and signed by Garza praised the Mexican president’s “resolution” to assist the U.S. in finding “potential terrorists” by allowing the FBI to interrogate suspicious foreigners in Mexican territory.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> James C. McKinley, Jr., Bush’s Ambassador to Mexico Is Sometimes Undiplomatic, *The New York Times*, August 20, 2005, p. A4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Carta del Embajador Antonio O. Garza, *El Universal*, January 26, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The perception among U.S. foreign policy circles was that the marriage represented a conflict of interest. Former Secretary of State George P. Shultz reportedly said in private that he would have recalled Garza to Washington.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico, “Scene Setter for the Visit to Mexico of FBI Deputy Director John S. Pistole, Mary 21-23, 2008”, Classification: Secret; Date: 2008-06-16, as reprinted by *El Pais.com internacional*, March 25, 2011.

Few U.S. ambassadors to Mexico, if any, have enjoyed a closer friendship with the president and the first lady than Garza has. What he did or said was perceived to carry the full weight of the White House seal. In the end, Garza's ambassadorship is probably best defined by his privileged relationship with the Bushes and his controversial marriage to Aramburuzabala. He is also the U.S. ambassador to Mexico who has served the longest since Joseph Daniels in 1933. Garza ended his tenure January 20, 2009 as President Barack Obama was being sworn into office in Washington, but he never moved back to Texas. Instead, he did something that none of his predecessors had done: adopt Mexico as his second home. He currently works in Mexico for a cross-border law firm.

I met Garza in an informal setting in Mexico City in December 2010. He was the first to know about my project to interview all former living ambassadors and the last to agree to be interviewed. In December 2011, I sent him a list of questions by e-mail that he answered and follow-up questions that he also answered in 54 minutes of recordings that he sent me in January. While the interview lacks the dynamism of a back-and-forth, in-person exchange, Garza is nevertheless generous and forthcoming in his answers.

\* \* \*

*How did your nomination come about?*

I was notified by President Bush. He called one day in March of 2001 and said he was thinking about asking me to serve in Mexico and if he were to do so what were my thoughts. I, of course, said, "Mr. President, should you extend that offer I would be honored to serve." I think it was more a product of 15 years' worth of conversations that we'd been having going back to the mid-1980s.

*Who informed you of your nomination?*

President Bush. It was kind of a funny situation. I was in the middle of a press conference in San Antonio and my chief of staff looked over at me, and I could tell she was a little anxious to get my attention and was pointing at the phone. I turned to the fellow that was going to follow me and introduced him and allowed him to begin his presentation, walked over to the phone and as I got on the line the operator said, "This is the White House, one moment for President Bush."

*Were you surprised?*

Two days earlier he had asked me to be his guest at the state dinner for President Fox—just a handful of days before 9/11. I had the opportunity to meet the incom-



ing Mexican team before. In fact, I think I was the only non-member of either administration that was invited to both the state dinner and the dinner at the Blair House the evening after. I do remember President Bush suggesting that it might be something I'd enjoy. I told him that I certainly would, but that I had a lot going on back in Texas, and we left it at that. During that visit, I had stayed at the White House with him and Laura, and we had a number of conversations about Mexico.

*When did you first meet President Bush?*

I first met former President Bush in the 1980s. We spent some time together in south Texas. At that time he was already keenly interested in Mexico, the border, and the challenges that we faced. I had the opportunity to serve at the local level as a county judge and then as secretary of state for Governor Bush. He was the first Texas governor to charge that office with the Texas-Mexico relationship, so I traveled with him to Mexico a number of times.

*How well did you know him?*

I felt I knew him quite well. We had a close personal relationship and an ease with which we could discuss issues. I think he valued my insights on Mexico and I learned a great deal from him on any number of issues. I knew him as a mentor of sorts but clearly a dear friend.

*Did you meet with him before leaving for Mexico?*

Yes, any number of times; the confirmation process is a fairly involved one. I was spending a great deal of time in Washington and President Bush was kind enough to invite me over, probably a handful, maybe more times. He would ask me how the process was going and how I was enjoying it. He was very interested in what was going on in Mexico in terms of the democracy that was standing up in the wake of the Fox election, but he also wanted a sense of what was going on in the other branches of government. We talked about the legislature and the expanding role they were playing in the formation of policy. He asked where I thought the judiciary was, both federal and state, and the evolution of the role of the governors. They were broad conversations about a country in transition that had long been a solid economic partner and that was evolving democratically in many ways. He was also very interested in Mexico's relationships with other countries in the region. It was an interesting time for us to have conversations that were outside the context of my being ambassador and outside the normal bureaucratic constraints of the State Department, the Security Council, or the other bureaucracies that would later be very much a part of my day-to-day life.

*Did he give you specific instructions about the mission in Mexico?*

I knew what the instructions were and what the relationship was to him. Any specific instructions probably weren't necessary in the sense that what I was being asked to do was an extension of not only the conversations we had been having for many years and my appreciation for the priority he gave the relationship, but also the roles I had played in Texas.

*Did President Bush ask you to call him if you ever needed something from him?*

Yes, that was pretty much a standing offer. I can say I talked to him on the phone a number of times throughout my tenure, but after I was sworn in November, perhaps three times a year. Through the first several years I was in Mexico and when I was in Washington, he was kind enough to invite me to stay with him and Laura at the White House. That led to an extended and relaxed opportunity to discuss a broad range of issues. By virtue of the fact that we never felt "pressed for time" when we'd have those opportunities a couple of times a year, he had a good sense of what I was doing and I had a very clear sense of his priorities. At times, when there were specific issues, or if a call to an individual within his administration might be helpful in moving something along, he was always happy to do it. I remember sitting in the Treaty Room of the White House when he did make a number of that type of call. I always found that people were very responsive to the president, and that gets things along at critical periods.

*What were President Bush's main concerns with respect to Mexico?*

His primary focus was that we have a mature, respectful, and open relationship with Mexico, and that we start to view each other more strategically.

*Did priorities change after 9/11?*

Certainly, in the wake of 9/11, the priority was to move well beyond where the two countries had traditionally been in terms of the exchange of information. We had to move beyond information to real intelligence and build a capacity that was necessary so that intelligence might be shared in real time. That entails building a great deal of trust and capacity among the individuals that were going to be in charge of the movement of very sensitive intelligence.

*Did the issue of security dominate the bilateral agenda after 9/11?*

The president had a much broader sense of the direction the relationship needed to evolve towards. Security—counter-terrorism—was a priority, but in terms of

the breadth and complexity, he understood Mexico's movement towards a democracy, the need to build the different institutions within the democracy, the legislature, the judiciary, the role of the states, and the strategic positioning that Mexico would have vis-à-vis the rest of the region, perhaps in ways that the United States couldn't, and historically not had.

*How would you describe Bush's policy toward Mexico?*

He was the first I heard characterizing the relationship as evolving beyond the traditional rhetoric of neighbors and friends, towards one of true partnership and a strategic ally, where there was a sense of an appreciation for the importance of Mexico. George W. Bush was probably the first president that, in the context of security, talked in terms of shared responsibility and acknowledged the impact U.S. consumption of drugs has on Mexico. He moved us towards a more transparent, honest and mature relationship. One can fill in the blanks in terms of the various initiatives ranging from security to the economy to additional integration to his desire to see real and true comprehensive immigration reform. Bush talked about removing obstacles to the marketplace in terms of the flow of people in a safe, secure and orderly way, and of the need for greater incentives for investment abroad.

*To what extent was Mexico a priority in the U.S. foreign policy agenda?*

What I saw was a very broad and deep institutional relationship at every level of government that covered every imaginable subject area. The foreign policy priority that is increasingly referred to as an "intermestic." Mexico is both international in the foreign policy dynamic but at the same time it has a very real impact on our domestic agenda in the United States. Mexico has always been a priority and more so now given the level of convergence between our two countries.

*Who did you deal with in Washington on a regular basis?*

In the first administration, at the State Department, with Secretary Colin Powell. But on a day-to-day basis, Roberta Jacobson<sup>8</sup> from day one to my last day at the embassy was always available, accessible and had a very good sense of what was going on in Mexico. In the White House, Hadley,<sup>9</sup> Condoleezza Rice<sup>10</sup> and Tom Shannon.<sup>11</sup> During the second administration, I had good relationships with

<sup>8</sup> Director of the Office of Mexican Affairs until December 2002 and then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, Department of State.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, 2001-2005.

<sup>10</sup> National Security Advisor, 2001-2005.

<sup>11</sup> Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2003-2005.

Rice<sup>12</sup> and Negroponte,<sup>13</sup> who had keen insights on Mexico, and at the Security Council, with Dan Fisk.<sup>14</sup> In both administrations, there was a nice alignment of people that knew Mexico, who had either worked in Mexico or had a particular interest in the country. Everyone knew how important Mexico was to Bush. In the embassy in Mexico, John Dickson<sup>15</sup> and, later on, Lesley Basset,<sup>16</sup> who served with me as my deputy the last couple of years. I was very blessed in terms of the individuals, their commitment, and our ability to interface with a whole range of Mexican officials. We all kept our eye on the ball.

*How did you get along with Secretary Powell?*

He was one of the most accessible people early on. He gave me his e-mail and his cell phone number and said, “If you’ve got to talk to me, you pick up that phone and talk to me. If you’ve got to get an e-mail to me and you want a response, I’ll turn it around.” Indeed he did. I remember having to coordinate between him and some of the leadership in Mexico on a Saturday and he was very accessible.

*How was your relationship with Fox?*

I always enjoyed a very good relationship with President Fox and his team. I had first met him in 1995 when he was governor of Guanajuato. He visited Governor Bush in Austin and they hit it off pretty well. Fox was very charismatic and became a historic figure. His election in 2000 was well covered in the United States. He had some very extraordinarily talented people in his team. I look back at Paco Gil,<sup>17</sup> certainly Julio Frenk,<sup>18</sup> Jorge Castañeda,<sup>19</sup> and General Vega.<sup>20</sup>

*Did you meet frequently with Fox?*

President Fox was accessible in the sense that we would have our meetings. We didn’t have too many one-on-one meetings, but he was kind enough to take my meetings when I requested them. He was also generous enough to invite me to dinner with both him and the first lady to discuss issues at different times. Towards the end of his administration, I also enjoyed a very good relationship with Carlos Abascal,<sup>21</sup> whom I found to be a first rate individual.

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<sup>12</sup> Secretary of State, 2005-2009.

<sup>13</sup> John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State, 2007-2009.

<sup>14</sup> Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council, 2005-2009.

<sup>15</sup> Ambassador John S. Dickson, Deputy Chief of Mission.

<sup>16</sup> Deputy Chief of Mission.

<sup>17</sup> Francisco Gil Diaz, Secretary of the Treasury, 2000-2006.

<sup>18</sup> Secretary of Health, 2000-2006.

<sup>19</sup> Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2000-2003.

<sup>20</sup> General Clemente Vega García, Secretary of National Defense, 2000-2006.

<sup>21</sup> Secretary of Gobernación (Interior).

*Did Fox trust you?*

I don't know that that's necessarily a fair question. That's something that you'd have to ask him, but I certainly enjoyed my relationship with him. I had respect for him and I admired him as an individual.

*What do you think went wrong between Bush and Fox?*

I'm not sure that anything ever really went wrong. People concentrated on the headlines of Mexico not supporting the United States in the UN Security Council, but they forget how much work had to be going on day-to-day to protect people in Mexico and in the United States. I think it was blown up in the press. Bush and Fox enjoyed a good relationship. Priorities change, but there was a lot of work to be done in terms of putting the interests of the region first and the need to build that security capacity in the face of what was going on in the world. Mexico worked very well and very openly with the United States. There were interests in Mexico that needed to be protected. A strike at the oil producing assets in the Bay of Campeche would hit the U.S. economically. Or a strike, for example, in a tourist resort in Mexico where large numbers of U.S. citizens or U.S. college students at spring break were, would be devastating for both Mexico and the United States. There was a certain amount of urgency about working closely during the Bush-Fox period. To protect and secure their country is one of the primary responsibilities of the president, and in order to do that, the United States was going to have to work closely with Mexico, and Mexico with the United States. The whole notion that something went wrong is over played.

*Did Castañeda attempt to link Mexico's vote in the Security Council to immigration?*

I never heard that suggested, but just to be clear, I actually didn't work with Jorge very long. Jorge left the foreign ministry sometime in the first part of 2003, shortly after I arrived in Mexico. I doubt that that was going on. They were very distinct issues and there were some very distinct players both at the UN Security Council, where Aguilar Zinser<sup>22</sup> was the Mexican representative, and at the Foreign Ministry, where Jorge was on point.

*Did you get along with Castañeda?*

Yes, Jorge is one of the most talented and brilliant people I've known to this day. I call him a friend and I enjoy seeing him and I think he is insightful. He's provoca-

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<sup>22</sup> Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 2002-2003. Died in 2005.

tive and he understands the United States. I didn't work with Jorge for very long, but I certainly enjoyed his friendship.

*Who did you deal with in the Mexican government on a regular basis?*

Day-to-day, over the six year period I was ambassador, there was nobody that I enjoyed a closer or more open relationship with than Gerónimo Gutiérrez.<sup>23</sup> On any range of issues where I wanted to bounce ideas, sought input or needed an answer, a yes or a no, Gerónimo was the go-to guy. This is a guy that knows government, he's sharp, he's straightforward and, as we say, he's a straight shooter. He'll tell you not only what he's thinking, but what the government's position will be. There's a lot of value in dealing with somebody that will tell you either yes or no, so that you can make your own decisions. I thought Gerónimo was just an extraordinarily talented guy.

*There were reports at the time that Derbez and you did not get along well. I remember you being called to the Foreign Ministry because of a statement you made about violence on the border scaring away investment. How was your relationship with Derbez?*

No, I actually thought I had a pretty decent relationship with Luis Ernesto. It would have probably been somewhat unusual for the ambassador to deal with the secretary day in and day out; more typical would be the ambassador dealing with the undersecretary, and that was Gerónimo. The incident you allude to is actually one where, after several months of discretely and increasingly openly expressing concerns about security and violence in the border, I wrote a letter to then President Fox and sent a copy to Luis Ernesto. I released it to a number of members of the media. There was a very different kind of challenge in terms of security, one that in Mexico City, there was a bit of denial. I grew up in Brownsville. I had, as a local elected official and a state official in the state of Texas for the previous ten to fifteen years, a very good network of people on both the United States and Mexico sides, from Brownsville-Matamoros to San Diego-Tijuana. I was hearing from elected officials, investors and business people on both sides that there had been a real change in nature and the type of violence that they were seeing. I sensed that in the administration in Mexico, the border seemed like a remote place. So I tried to elevate the visibility. I know that perhaps Mr. Derbez was uncomfortable with that. I remember reading reports that I had been summoned to SRE (the Foreign Ministry), but that never happened. In fact, Gerónimo called and said, "You are not being summoned," and I jokingly said, "Well, that's good, because I'm 45 years old, I've never been prep-walked and I'm not going to start now." A few days later,

<sup>23</sup> Under Secretary for North American Affairs, 2003-2006.

Luis Ernesto was kind enough to invite me to the Four Seasons Hotel for the afternoon. I think he had coffee, and Gerónimo and I probably had tequilas. We had a nice visit. But the truth of the matter is that I was very concerned and I felt there wasn't sufficient attention being given to what was clearly a change in the nature of the challenge that the country was going to be facing.

*Leading up to the elections, most polls suggested that Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador<sup>24</sup> was ahead, as pollsters told you when you met them regularly at the Embassy.<sup>25</sup> Was the U.S. nervous about an AMLO victory?*

There were various expressions of concern in different sectors, or from different individuals within the government. But was there a broad-based nervousness across all sectors of government about Andrés Manuel? No, not really one that I detected. If one were to reflect on that period, I think Andrés Manuel and his team did a very good job with the editorial boards of some of the major U.S. newspapers positioning him as a center-left politician and using the country's experience with him as the mayor of Mexico City as an example of the type of president he might be. There was an effort by some, perhaps it was the PRI and the PAN, to push the notion that somehow he would be the next Chavez,<sup>26</sup> a characterization that, quite frankly, he didn't do much to dispel in the wake of that election.<sup>27</sup>

*Was there a response prepared by the White House or State for the eventuality of an AMLO victory?*

I don't know. I think there were probably some people at their desk busily pecking away at their computers, hoping that if they needed one, theirs would be the first draft of history, but I doubt that it evolved to too serious of a level, because I didn't see it.

*Did you meet with Calderón during the time the dispute over the results was being decided by the Mexican Federal Electoral Tribunal?<sup>28</sup>*

In the wake of the 2006 presidential elections, I met with a lot of individuals on all sides of the political process. At my July 4<sup>th</sup> party that year, after the elections, we had representatives from both the Andrés Manuel and the Felipe Calderón camps,

<sup>24</sup> 2006 PRD presidential candidate, known as AMLO, his initials.

<sup>25</sup> Department of State, Declassified/Released Document Collection, 2006 Mexican Presidential Elections. The cables revealed that the final round of polls by the five most influential polling firms in Mexico before the July 2, 2006 elections were giving AMLO a narrow lead.

<sup>26</sup> Hugo Chávez, the staunchly anti-American president of Venezuela.

<sup>27</sup> López Obrador called on his followers to carry out civil disobedience by blocking Paseo Reforma, Mexico's main artery. The protests created traffic chaos and were highly unpopular.

<sup>28</sup> After the Federal Election Institute declared Calderón the winner by 0.56 percent of the vote, AMLO challenged the results favoring Calderón, which were eventually ratified by the Electoral Tribunal.

and there was a lot of *grilla* [political gossip] about the election and how heavily contested it was. I turned to Mariasun,<sup>29</sup> my then wife, and said, “Baby, are we in Florida?” I think that kind of lightened the moment. But there was a sense that there was a democratic process that the country could be proud of and an electoral commission that was going to do its job. In the wake of that election, I did visit with Andrés Manuel and then candidate Felipe Calderón. Once, maybe twice. And one afternoon, I snuck away and walked down Reforma, where I found the protest. While they were disruptive to traffic, I found a lot of people just out there expressing what they felt were legitimate grievances, and I thought it was actually quite healthy.

*You remained as ambassador when President Calderón came to office. Were there differences between your dealings with Fox and Calderón?*

In many respects there were, largely because I met President Calderón early on in my tenure as ambassador, when he was still at Banobras,<sup>30</sup> and we hit it off very comfortably and enjoyed a nice rapport. Generationally we’re very close. We have many of the same interests. He maintained that friendship throughout his time in Energy.<sup>31</sup> And in the lead up to the campaign, I visited with all the candidates: certainly now President Calderón; Roberto Madrazo,<sup>32</sup> whom I’d met in the ‘90s; and López Obrador, who had been very accessible to me during the time he was the mayor of Mexico City. I enjoyed good relationships with all the candidates, but Felipe, now President Calderón, was somebody that I established an easy rapport with. He had a nice sense of humor, but beyond that, I was impressed with his serious side and his vision for Mexico.

*How much access did you have to Calderón?*

President Calderón was always very accessible. Not only throughout the first several years, prior to being president, but throughout the campaign. In the early part of his presidency, he invited me into his home for dinner, and we stayed in contact and to this day I enjoy a good relationship with him. He knows I have a great deal of respect for him and his administration for the courage that he’s shown in standing up to some very difficult challenges that Mexico has faced over the course of the last few years.

*Did he trust you?*

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<sup>29</sup> María Asunción Aramburuzabala.

<sup>30</sup> Calderón was director of the Mexican development bank Banco de Obras y Servicios Públicos (Banobras) in 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Calderón was Secretary of Energy from 2003 to 2004.

<sup>32</sup> PRI 2006 presidential candidate.



I like to think so, but at the end of the day that's a question that you have to ask him. I remember early on, I told him, "I will be as honest with you as I am with my own president, and if it means sometimes you'll be upset with what you hear, so be it."

*What did he say?*

He laughed and he said, "That's all I want from you."

*Did you ever discuss the Pascual controversy with Calderón?*

Over the course of these last years since I left the embassy, we continue to see each other from time to time, but in terms of discussing that specific controversy, no. I think the closest thing was—and it was long after Ambassador Pascual returned to Washington—standing around in a small group when somebody made a comment about me being "*El embajador que se quedó*," and the president looked at me and I smiled and I said, "*No, al que no corriste*," and we chuckled about that. But really, that was not my place to act as an interlocutor on that.

*Have you kept in touch with many of the players you met as ambassador?*

I'm doing that here at the law firm. I think I have a very privileged relationship with political players and business interests, in the media, all across the spectrum, so I still talk to a lot of people and the president has been kind enough to keep me within that group of folks that he sees from time to time.

*What was your background on Mexico?*

All my life I had a pretty good sense of the importance of Mexico, the nature and the ease of the relationship that we enjoyed. My grandparents had immigrated from Mexico and my parents and I had lived in south Texas along the border where I grew up. Forty or fifty percent of my classmates were from Matamoros. As I got older I studied for a while in Mexico, jumped on and off the buses as I traveled around the interior. I remember in the summer of 1982 spending lots of time in Oaxaca and Michoacán, studying in Guadalajara as a young lawyer representing clients from the Monterrey area. It was October of 1989 when I was first invited to the White House, and President Bush the 41<sup>st</sup> was hosting President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. I sat with President Salinas that evening at his table and I was fascinated. That was the period leading up to the NAFTA, and there was a sense that the nature of our relationship would be changing and we would see more economic integration and more partnership in that regard.

*How would you define the role of the American ambassador in Mexico?*

The role has changed, and not simply because the relationship has changed, but because Mexico has also changed. For 70 years, the U.S. ambassador was focused on the executive branch and the nature of their effectiveness was driven largely by the relationship with Los Pinos and Gobernación. As Mexico evolves and opens up, the role is such that you have to be a lot of things at different times throughout the day. I used to jokingly say in my very public role I was like brand manager for the United States—how it was perceived, how people thought about the United States in Mexico. On more specific issues of our U.S. interest abroad and of our investors, there were times when I had the role of legislative director, interfacing with the legislature and with the different players within that process. There were other times when on very specific issues I was essentially the attorney for the U.S. interest abroad. In these more disparate roles of brand manager, legislative director, and attorney, one needed to engage many parties—the executive and legislative branches, civil society—interface with the press and deal with the private sector and non-governmental organizations. The role has evolved, and it's much broader than a handful of very key relationships. It's much more important to have many relationships across the board and to cultivate them in a way that's designed to allow the ambassador to represent the U.S. interest abroad in a myriad of circumstances and in different groups.

*Is there a new brand of diplomacy in which American ambassadors seek more actively to transform countries?*

I don't think U.S. ambassadors seek to transform countries, certainly not a country like Mexico. What one has to do is understand the country and appreciate the interests that are aligned with the United States and make sure that one is communicating what's going on both to the United States and to the leadership in Mexico.

*Do ambassadors play a role in Washington's policy making process?*

It is in many respects a function of how active the ambassador chooses to be or how much he or she is asked to participate in the process. I always tried to make myself available as people sought input on some of the questions that had to do with Mexico. During the Mérida Initiative, I spent many days in Washington talking individually to members of Congress. I like to think that it was helpful and that it had some input on our policy. My guess is that it did help.

*Would you say that more often than not Mexico is taken for granted until there is a crisis with a potential threat to U.S. national security?*

That's generally true of governments—not just our government, but governments around the world. This is a very deep relationship that may not play out every day on the front pages, but there's a lot of foundation for dealing with difficult times. The key to dealing with crises is the tone with which we address issues, and in that sense former President Bush and his counterparts, Fox and Calderón, generally did a very good job.

*What did it mean to you to be U.S. ambassador to Mexico?*

When I was asked to serve as the U.S. ambassador to Mexico I commented to my friends that only in America could the son of poor grandparents who left Mexico looking for opportunities rise and have the opportunity to represent the United States in their home country. It was really an extraordinary honor as a citizen, but also a very personal and deeply touching honor as an individual.

*Was it the most challenging post of your career?*

On that last day when I walked out, the day President Obama was sworn in and I knew that I was leaving the embassy for the last time, I felt very good about having been given the opportunity to serve my country, very satisfied with the job that I'd done. In a sense it had been challenging, but I've not looked back. I enjoy what I am doing now and I've been given a good opportunity to continue to live in Mexico and to work with many of the people I've met over the last ten years. It was a wonderful post.



**CARLOS PASCUAL**

**CARLOS PASCUAL** was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1959. He earned a B.A. from Stanford University in 1980 and received his M.P.P. from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 1982. Ambassador Pascual has had a 25-year career in the Department of State, the National Security Council and the U.S. Agency for International Development. As coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization, he led and organized U.S. assistance for countries in transition from conflict and civil wars. In 2003 he was coordinator for U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia. From 2000 to 2003, he served as U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. From 2006 to 2009 he was vice president and director of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, focusing his research on China, Northeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe. In August 2009, the U.S. Senate confirmed President Obama's nomination of Pascual as U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Upon his resignation in March 2011, he returned to Washington to take the new position of Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs.

During his 19 months as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, the North American Leaders Summit took place in Guadalajara; a cabinet-level delegation led by Secretary Clinton attended the second Mérida U.S.-Mexico High Level Consultative Group meeting in Mexico City; Obama honored Calderón with his second state visit to Washington; three American U.S. consulate employees in Ciudad Juárez were ambushed and killed; an American law enforcement official was gunned down in San Luis Potosí; Clinton met with Calderón in Mexico to reinforce ties in the wake of the Wikileaks scandal; and a U.S. secret law enforcement investigation that allowed firearms to flow to criminals in Mexico was uncovered.

## 9 / CARLOS PASCUAL

2009-2011

Carlos Pascual was President Barack Obama's first envoy to Mexico. He presented credentials in August 2009. Obama had not known Pascual personally, but he was convinced by his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, that the quiet, Cuban-born diplomat was the right man for Mexico. An expert on security issues, with proven experience in coordinating and managing U.S. assistance in European and Eurasian countries in transition, Pascual was seen as an able manager who could advance the Mérida Initiative, a 1.4 billion dollar U.S. counternarcotics assistance package for Mexico. But 19 months into his tenure, Pascual resigned in the middle of a political storm that revived the resentment and distrust that has long characterized U.S.-Mexico relations.

After the anti-secret group Wikileaks released U.S. Embassy confidential cables portraying the Mexican Army as “risk-averse” and inefficient, President Felipe Calderón blamed Pascual for causing “severe damage” to the relationship and his attacks on him took on a personal tone. A few hours before meeting President Obama at the White House, Calderón told *The Washington Post*<sup>1</sup> that he was not sure he could still work with the ambassador, noting that trust was “difficult to build” and “easy to lose.” This level of hostility against Washington's envoy was unseen for nearly a century, when Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson overtly supported a coup in 1913 and Mexico broke relations with the United States. However, many observers contend to this day that Calderón's rage had more to do with Pascual's new brand of diplomatic activism and to his romantic involvement with the daughter of one of Calderón's leading political adversaries, than with the Wikileaks cables. The Obama Administration maintained that Pascual did nothing wrong, that indeed he was “doing a tremendous work”<sup>2</sup> and resisted removing him. But Pascual took the decision to leave because, as he said, “the anger that President Calderón felt toward me, and that he felt he had to express it publicly,

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1 Mary Beth Sheridan, “Calderón cites ‘serious damage’ to U.S. ties,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2011, p A9.

2 *Ibid.*

was such that it was distracting attention from the really serious issues that we had to focus on in the relationship.” In her statement announcing Pascual’s resignation, Secretary Clinton said that she was doing it with “great regret” and accepting it with “great reluctance.”<sup>3</sup>

Before arriving in Mexico, Pascual’s extensive writings on failed states while serving as the director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, offended many Mexican politicians and opinion makers who complained that the “messenger was the message.” Pascual’s weak knowledge on Mexico and the fact that he was not an Obama insider, further fueled his critics. Unlike many of his predecessors, Pascual did not have direct access to the president, but rather to Secretary Clinton, who was his most senior contact and staunch defender in Washington. I interviewed Ambassador Pascual in November 2011 for an hour at the State Department, where he now heads the new Bureau for Energy Resources and is the Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs. He spoke cautiously about his brief tenure, his strong appreciation of Mexico, his close relationship with Secretary Clinton, President Obama’s commitment to developing a “balanced relationship” with Mexico, the high-level attention paid to Mexico by the White House, the regular meetings on Mexico held in the Situation Room, Calderón’s personal attacks, and his decision to resign and move forward. He declined to talk about Wikileaks and denied that U.S. diplomacy has a double message. Pascual left Mexico without speaking again with Calderón.

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*How did your nomination come about?*

Secretary Clinton called me. I was actually in China at the time presenting a book that we had just written that had been translated into Chinese. She said she had just spoken to the president and that the two of them would like to ask me to be the ambassador to Mexico. I was thrilled and I accepted.

*Was it a surprise?*

Yes, almost totally ... I was at the Brookings Institution.

*Did you know President Obama?*

No, I had not met President Obama at that point. I’d known Secretary Clinton for quite some time because I’d worked at the White House under President Clinton for five years. We maintained contact when she was in the

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Ambassador Carlos Pascual.” Department of State, Press Statement, March 19, 2011.

Senate on a number of principally security issues. When she had been asked to take the position of Secretary of State, I had met with her several times to help provide briefings on some broader global issues that could potentially be helpful to her.

*Did she tell you why she thought you would be the right person for the post?*

She said, “It’s a huge challenge, it’s a challenge that involves all U.S. government agencies, we need someone who has had experience working with a wide range of agencies bringing them together, and we think you’re the right person for the job.”

*But you did not have much background on Mexico, correct?*

I had done some work on Mexico, particularly when I was at Brookings in the context of some of the global issues that I was working on. But I think that the critical issue that she raised when we talked was that in my career, I consistently had experience working in environments that involved many, many different parts of the U.S. government and trying to bring them together and integrate them into a strategic framework that made sense.

*Did she mention your experience in dealing with countries in crisis?*

No, that never came up. It was all over the media before I came to Mexico, and it was the first question I was asked in an interview, but it actually never came up in any of our discussions in Washington as a factor of why they had asked me to go to Mexico.

*Your first meeting with President Obama was after you were confirmed?*

My confirmation was on August 7, 2009, and on August 9, I flew down to Guadalajara on Air Force One to participate in the North American Leaders<sup>4</sup> Summit. It wasn’t the first time I met him, but it was the first time I met him after I was confirmed.

*Did you discuss with President Obama what your mission in Mexico would be?*

On the plane, on the way down to Guadalajara, I had a discussion with him, General James Jones,<sup>5</sup> James Steinberg,<sup>6</sup> Larry Summers,<sup>7</sup> Carol Browner<sup>8</sup> and Janet Napolitano.<sup>9</sup> All of us sat around a table on the plane and we discussed what

<sup>4</sup> Presidents Obama and Calderón, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

<sup>5</sup> National Security Advisor, 2009-2010.

<sup>6</sup> Deputy Secretary of State, 2009-2011.

<sup>7</sup> Director of the National Economic Council, 2009-2010.

<sup>8</sup> Director of the Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, 2009-2011.

<sup>9</sup> Secretary of Homeland Security, 2009-present.



some of the critical issues and transitions were in Mexico. Given the composition of the group, it was a wide-ranging discussion. It obviously included some of the security questions, but we also spent a fair bit of time on energy-related issues, on challenges of continued economic stability and growth. This was the time when we were in the midst of the recession that affected the United States, Mexico and the entire global economic community. All of these were critical issues on the agenda and in some ways interrelated, particularly the economic and the security issues. There was a keen awareness on everyone's mind that if one could not work with Mexico then to help stabilize its economy and help it onto a path toward economic growth, that that could inevitably have an impact on the security environment and lure young people into organized crime.

*Did Obama say, "These are my priorities," or was there any kind of guidance or mission that was given to you?*

The critical thing that the president did was to reinforce that we had a diverse set of priorities that had to be addressed. He had tried already to outline and identify that in his speeches. He did it very clearly when he first went to Mexico in April of 2009 and again in Guadalajara at the summit. In the discussions that we had privately on the plane, there was an attempt to continue to understand on the security situation what some of the huge challenges facing Mexico were and where we could be most helpful and supportive in order to reinforce the rule of law. On the economic side, there was a recognition that both of our economies had gone through a tremendous stress. We discussed the need to be able to continue close coordination on macro-economic policy issues in the context of the G-20, and in that context to also pay attention to community-based and social development issues that could have an impact on the local economic environment, which led to eventually incorporating these questions into our security strategy as well. With Carol Browner, there was a discussion about a set of issues that both President Obama and President Calderón both feel passionate about, which is not only energy security but the sustainability of our energy systems and the impact on the environment and how our countries can begin to work more closely together to promote renewable energy. All of those were themes which I took very seriously, and I worked with our inter-agency community back here in Washington so that we had a very dynamic process of advancing these questions there and here in a parallel and coordinated way.

*Was the top priority to help stabilize the security situation in Mexico?*

It would be wrong to say it is the main concern of the U.S. administration. It is an absolutely critical concern that has to be addressed because it so profoundly

affects both countries, but from the outset, when I took the position as ambassador, the emphasis that the president gave me and that Secretary Clinton reinforced was that this has to be a balanced relationship. Obviously we have to be able to devote time to media crisis issues that are affecting the security environment, public opinion and public confidence in both countries. You can't ignore that, but they have been adamant throughout that the relationship needs to be broader than that and that we need to keep putting those other issues on the agenda.

*During the 19 months you were ambassador, how much time did you invest in the Mérida Initiative?*

If one pretended that I worked 40 hours a week, then I could easily have said that the security agenda took half of my time. I didn't work 40 hours a week—I worked 80 to 90 hours a week--and so I would say the security agenda took half of my time, sometimes less.

*How much time did you spend dealing with the interagency problems inside the embassy?*

We had no fighting. We had from the outset an extraordinarily cooperative relationship among all of the agencies. I attribute that to the quality of the personnel that we had, to John Feeley,<sup>10</sup> to some of the senior individuals from the FBI and DEA and to the head of our narcotics affairs section. But what helped tremendously was that in the short period of time that I was there, we worked very closely between the embassy, Washington, and the Mexican government in putting together a four-part strategic framework<sup>11</sup> that identified the priorities that we had on our security assistance. Everybody understood very clearly how they fit in and what their collaborative roles could be. Quite frankly, I found everybody to be extremely excited to be able to work together. Perhaps it might be a difference from the situation of my predecessors, but I did not have major internal battles.

*What about ATF's Fast & Furious<sup>12</sup> investigation?*

We had no knowledge of Fast and Furious as an operation. As Attorney General Eric Holder has said, whatever was done under Fast and Furious was not consistent with U.S. policy. He made very clear when he found out about it that he was calling for an investigation. We were not involved in organizing or planning it. We did not even know about it. But in any case, something of that nature was miniscule

<sup>10</sup> Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 2009-2012.

<sup>11</sup> Refers to the four pillars of the Mérida Initiative: disrupt organized crime operations; strengthen the rule of law; create a 21st century border structure and build strong and resilient communities.

<sup>12</sup> A sting operation run by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) condemned by Mexico. It allowed guns to walk into Mexico between 2006 and 2010.

in relation to the broader security cooperation program that we had. The overall program coordination that we had across agencies was really extraordinary.

*You are often identified as the brains behind the four-part Mérida strategy. What was your role in putting it together?*

Many of us worked together, it was a very close association among me and my team in the embassy, and our colleagues in the Mexican government. Jorge Tello, who at that point was the national security advisor to the president, played an absolutely central role in pulling together Mexican views on the strategy. Back in Washington, John Brennan<sup>13</sup> and Dan Restrepo<sup>14</sup> played a very important role in bringing together the inter-agency community here. When you have something this big that is of this complexity, it doesn't work because one or two people want it and pursue it; it works only because you have a team that's really committed to actually trying to pursue it, and we developed an excellent team to be able to do that.

*Who did you deal with in Washington?*

It was a whole team. There were two or three essential people here in the State Department: Arturo Valenzuela,<sup>15</sup> Roberta Jacobson<sup>16</sup> and David Johnson,<sup>17</sup> who was on the security issues, an extremely important player. In the White House, Dan Restrepo was the key person, who involved John Brennan whose time became extremely tight especially after a number of terrorist events occurred later in 2009.

*Did you feel that you were getting enough attention from Washington about what was going on in Mexico?*

We were always able to get people to focus on the issues that we needed to have addressed. Fortunately, we were not in the same category as some other countries that were constantly in the middle of a crisis. You never want to be in that category. But there were very important issues that we needed to deal with and there were regular meetings convened at the White House on Mexico strategy and policy. It was extremely positive for me that the White House team and the State Department encouraged my participation in those meetings through video conferences, which helped ensure that we had close coordination between the realities on

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<sup>13</sup> Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, 2009-present.

<sup>14</sup> Director of the Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council, 2009-present.

<sup>15</sup> Assistant Secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs, 2009-2011.

<sup>16</sup> Deputy Assistant Secretary for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, 2007-2010, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs, 2010-2011.

<sup>17</sup> Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2007-2011.

the ground and the policy discussions in Washington. I would say that at any point in time that I felt that I needed additional help and support, I was able to get it.

*Did you ever feel you had to speak to President Obama to get the support you needed?*

We didn't function that way. Secretary Clinton encouraged me to send her regular notes on developments in Mexico. I took advantage of that; I used those judiciously. I felt that I had a regular channel of communications with her and that if there were any times when I either needed to talk with her or get a message to her, she and her staff were immediately accommodating. I feel that the White House staff was regularly engaged with the president on issues when they needed to bring him in on those questions, and I would say at the level of John Brennan and Dan Restrepo, there were very, very regular communications, especially with Dan—perhaps daily.

*Were you aware of meetings in the situation room on Mexico?*

I was aware of all of them. The Situation Room is like the senior level conference room. There would be issues on Mexico and I would regularly be brought into those meetings through a secure videoconference. It wasn't just in crisis situations; it was regular over a period of time, because we tried to make sure that we maintained a consistent view of policy on Mexico. If you only meet around crisis, you never get out of the crisis. We tried to make sure we kept building on policy and improving it as we went forward. Perhaps not everyone may have felt that things moved as quickly as they wanted them to—nothing ever moves as quickly as you want it to—but the level of attention was high and consistent.

*Because of the high level of violence, is Mexico among the top five countries of concern for U.S. national security?*

Violence is obviously a concern. It is an extremely important issue that affects people, business and confidence in both countries. You have to pay attention to those issues, but if you focus only on those questions, you don't utilize all of the tools that are necessary to both advance the relationship and in the end be able to get beyond the issue of violence. Addressing questions of trade and economic growth are completely consistent with helping to create an environment that will give young people an alternative to a life of crime. Issues like education and cultural exchanges, economic investment and trade, and development of renewable energy connections between the two countries are all part of an agenda of growth and stability that have to move in a complementary way to the security agenda.

*You said that the relationship with Mexico is the United States' most important relationship in the world. Isn't that an exaggeration?*

I said it's among the most important. I think the exact words I used were that no other relationship more directly affects the lives of people in the United States than the U.S.-Mexico relationship. That's true, because there is no other relationship that is closer in terms of proximity, economics, security, culture, and personal engagement on a human level. All of those things permeate both societies, affect the streets of the United States and the streets of Mexico. That unique situation is not replicated anywhere, not even in Canada. We have to remember that when we work on issues related to Mexico, because as some of my predecessors have said, we deal with an "intermestic" environment, something which is international and domestic at the same time.

*What does it mean to have a "special relationship" with Mexico?*

It means that we have tried at every level of government, civil society, and the private sector to intertwine our societies and make those connections stronger. The president of the United States has made a strong personal effort to engage President Calderón and to develop a personal understanding so that they can work through difficult questions. In our government, we have had continued and sustained engagement among a whole range of cabinet members. When we have had meetings of the high level group on security, we have brought together the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the secretary of homeland security, the attorney general, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the head of our intelligence service, and others in an exchange of ideas, strategies, and action plans of how we can move together to make progress. The United States does not do that with every country. We have sought to replicate that by promoting ties at business and civil society levels because all of those factors are key to our interest in stability and prosperity between the two countries.

*How do you explain Mexican strong anti-American public opinion?*

If one looks at the public opinion polls in Mexico and asks them what country they like the most, they say the United States; if one asks them what country they want to visit, most say the United States; if one asks what country they would want their kids to grow up in if they couldn't grow up in Mexico, they would say the United States. Yes, there are nationalistic tensions and sometimes they herald back 150 years, but at the same time there is an awareness of the closeness of the relationships between the two countries, the ways we have become intertwined in the education system and our music. I don't just mean Latin music, but the influ-

ences of rock-and-roll from the United States into Mexico and the influences of Mexican rock-and-roll like Carlos Santana into the United States, and actors and actresses, at every level of our society. There are times when there may be tensions or frustrations, and those frustrations may go in both directions, but in the end, the recognition is that we are neighbors who are better off when we work together to try to advance our joint interest within a global economic context.

*Because of your background as an expert on “failed states,” many in Mexico criticized your nomination on the grounds that the “the messenger was the message.” What were your thoughts at the time?*

In any society, there may be insecurities about the way that they are perceived and seen. For some reason there was a desire to focus on the work I had done on conflict states and states in transition when I went to Mexico. Ironically, the previous three and a half years, when I was at Brookings, the principle work that I had done was on transnational issues, the importance of the cooperation of the G-20, and the role that countries like Mexico increasingly played in setting a global agenda. None of those issues were ever mentioned. If they wanted to say that the messenger was the message, then they probably, more accurately, looked at the book that I had written, *Power and Responsibility*,<sup>18</sup> where I talked about how the G-20 needs to be part of the critical governing body in the way that we guide the international order. Quite frankly, after the first month, most of it went away.

*When you were the coordinator for reconstruction and stability at the Department of State, there was a list of high-risk countries. Was Mexico on it?*

No.

*Cooperation between the two countries on counter-narcotics has reached unprecedented levels under the Obama administration. Does accepting this type of cooperation, that the Mexican government would have rejected in the past, reflect a fundamental change in attitudes towards the U.S.?*

I can't answer that. A Mexican government official would have to answer whether the concerns about sovereignty are serious issues or not. I can say that on the part of the United States, we were always mindful and respectful of Mexican sovereignty and sought to follow a Mexican lead. We looked at it from the perspective that we were both dealing with a regional problem. This is not a Mexico or a United States or a South American issue, but the questions of consumption, transit, and supply

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen Stedman, *Power & Responsibility Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats*, (Brookings Institute Press 2009).

are all interlinked throughout the entire region. The only way to effectively be able to work on that together is to be able to share information, to help build capacity, and to use the skills and the expertise that one has in a way that bolsters the capabilities of each nation. And so, from our perspective, we were always strengthening Mexican sovereignty because we were seeking to build Mexican capabilities and Mexico's capacity to address these issues.

I should also stress that we consistently invited Mexico to join us in investigative activities in the United States. There were numerous occasions when our Mexican counterparts would come to the United States and interview witnesses and participate in some form of investigative activities. Unfortunately, this was generally ignored and not something that was appreciated as part of the cooperative nature that we had between the two countries. The final thing that I would say is that we in the United States have consistently had an appreciation for the importance of the rule of law in combating any form of organized crime. In the end, success doesn't come just by showing strength against bad guys; it means being able to investigate them, arrest them, prosecute them, and keep them in jail. If there is one area that we felt was particularly important it was to help strengthen capacity in the administration of the rule of law and being able to build that up over time.

*But do you perceive a fundamental change of attitude towards the United States?*

Let me put it this way. My experience in Mexico underscored to me that the question of standing up to organized crime and advancing the rule of law was not a partisan issue. It wasn't a PAN issue, it wasn't a PRI issue, and it wasn't a PRD issue, though they were less engaged in some of those questions and there was more variance among the PRD candidates. What we consistently heard was the issue of security for Mexican citizens was a challenge and an issue for the Mexican state, and the Mexican state needed to undertake this in a way that was effective, and if there were others who could bring capabilities, teach lessons, and provide strength and support then that should be welcomed. I heard that from leaders of the PAN and of the PRI. Even some of the leaders of the PRI who were at times publicly critical said that to us in private.

*Publicly, the U.S. message highlights cooperation and co-responsibility, but in private one senses and hears a lot of frustration, as seen in the Wikileaks cables. Is there a double message, and which is real?*

I can't comment on anything related to Wikileaks, and whether the cables that were published were real cables or not, I can't get into those questions. What I can tell you is that the comments that we make publicly about our cooperation and our engagement

are sincere and the dialogue that we have with Mexico on how to be able to achieve it is an open, honest, and sincere one. I've never been in a professional organization, or seen a professional organization, that doesn't explore and understand its weaknesses or areas where it needs to do better. If you don't question the areas where you may not be doing as well as you would like to, you can't get better. What the United States was doing was trying to understand where the shortcomings are, what the reasons for the shortcomings are, and how can they be improved. We obviously shared that information and those impressions with our Mexican counterparts. To the extent we could, we worked together to be able to improve them when they involved both of us. I think that that's simply a sign of maturity because it's only through that kind of self-assessment that you get to the point of being able to deliver the kind of results that you want to.

*What got Calderón upset with you to the point that you had to resign?*

I can't speak for President Calderón and the issues that upset him. He made very clear in interviews that he gave in Mexico and here to *The Washington Post* that he was upset. On the basis of that, what I said to Secretary Clinton and to President Obama was that I did not think it was constructive for me to continue in Mexico because, in effect, President Calderón had made me the issue in the relationship, rather than the many issues that we had to work on between the two countries. Secretary Clinton asked me to think it over.

*Was that before Calderón came to Washington in March of 2011, or was your decision to quit triggered by his public statements against you to *The Washington Post*?*

I made a decision that it was best for me to resign at the beginning of March because the anger that President Calderón felt toward me, and that he felt he had to express it publicly, was such that it was distracting attention from the really serious issues that we had to focus on in the relationship. As Secretary Clinton requested, I spent some time considering that and thinking about it. I came back to her and reaffirmed my decision, and that was when a few weeks later in March we decided to go forward and issue the public statement about my resignation.<sup>19</sup> With that, hopefully we would be able to diminish the attention that was focused on me as an individual. She asked me to stay some time longer to facilitate a transition. She subsequently asked me to take the job which I currently have.

*Can you comment specifically on what you think got Calderón upset?*

Anything I would say would be speculation, and it's not useful to speculate.

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<sup>19</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Ambassador Carlos Pascual," Department of State, Press Statement, March 19, 2011.



*Did you speak to him about it?*

No, I did not.

*You did say in the piece in El Universal<sup>20</sup> that you had spoken to various people in the Mexican government about the problems that resulted from the Wikileaks cables.*

It was a piece that was written in December of 2010. There were developments between the emergence of those alleged cables in December of 2010 and March of 2011. Over that period of time, the dynamic became such that I felt that it was not constructive for me to stay.

*How was your relationship with Calderón prior to Wikileaks?*

It was a constructive, professional relationship. We would meet from time to time. He very graciously invited me to travel with him on his airplane a couple of times to Ciudad Juárez. I was especially appreciative when he allowed me to travel with him to visit our consulate in Ciudad Juárez after three of our colleagues were killed there in March 2010. We had had a number of good conversations both one-on-one and in larger groups. I thought the relationship had been quite professional and constructive.

*Did things start to change around Wikileaks towards the end of 2010?*

There was a dramatic change.

*Was your access to Los Pinos and to Calderón shut down at that point?*

To Los Pinos there was continued access. There were many people in Los Pinos who would call me and would ask me to come over because there was a lot of work that needed to be done. So, ironically, it did not become a factor in being able to do other work that we needed to do with other senior people in the government.

*It was not until Calderón personalized his anger against you and made you the issue that there was a problem?*

That's right.

*Now, the issue of human rights violations and the military, was that something Calderón did not want to discuss?*

It was an issue that President Obama raised with Calderón. We raised it with great respect and we did it in the context of our own lessons of the importance of upholding human rights in our national policies. We reflected on the lessons that we had learned when there had been questions about our own international human

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Pascual, "Wikileaks en contexto", *El Universal*, December 3, 2010.

rights policies, including at Abu Ghraib prison.<sup>21</sup> The lesson that we had learned is that it never pays to operate on the margins of international law and human rights, and that is absolutely necessary to reinforce the bold and strong principles that underpin respect for human rights in any country's foreign and national policies.

*What was Calderón's response?*

His response was to say that he believed that Mexico needed to adhere to a strong human rights policy as well.

*Based on your experience, how would you define the role of the U.S. ambassador in Mexico?*

The U.S. ambassador facilitates contacts, connections, and understandings between both societies. We help explain the United States to Mexico—what we are seeking to achieve, do, and have. We are trying to advance the interests of both countries. The ambassador also tries to explain the realities that exist in Mexico and how they affect our interests in the United States. In effect, the ambassador is the central point in communications and seeks to use it in both directions as a way to advise about the best course we can take on U.S. policy.

*Does the U.S. ambassador get involved in policy making?*

It depends on Washington and the role that they seek the U.S. ambassador to play. I was very fortunate in that I was brought into most policy deliberations on Mexico and had an opportunity to contribute perspectives and views from the environment there on the ground in a constructive way. Technology helps; 25 years ago my predecessors would not have been able to participate in a White House meeting through a secure video conference. I could, and that greatly facilitated my ability to be able to be part of the policy team.

*Has the role of the U.S. ambassador changed or diminished as the relationship has become so intense and broad, involving actors at different levels of government such that sometimes the contacts don't necessarily go through the U.S. Embassy?*

The embassy should always be a central point of contact in the relationship between the two countries. That doesn't mean that there shouldn't be direct communications between, say, the attorney general's office in the United States and the attorney general's office in Mexico, or the Treasury Department in the United States and Hacienda in Mexico. That's all very constructive. But we always try to ensure, on the U.S. side, that when we have those kinds of communications, we

<sup>21</sup> In 2004, it was made public that American soldiers committed serious violations of human rights and torture Iraqi prisoners held in Abu Ghraib in Iraq.

at least inform or advise the embassy, because there are always moments and situations where the embassy will need to follow up, explain something in greater detail, and serve as a liaison. So one of the lessons that we have learned over time is that as much as you can have direct communication between different departments within the two governments, it is never a substitute for involving the embassy and ensuring that you can have an in-person, on-the-ground capacity to follow up and to clarify issues as necessary.

*Would you say that Mexico is one of the most challenging posts in the U.S. Foreign Service?*  
It was for me.

*How do you feel about your 19-month experience there?*

I love Mexico very much. It is a beautiful, warm, enchanting, and vibrant country, and I will always have those perceptions of Mexico when I think about it. During my time as ambassador, we had to work through some very complicated, difficult issues, most of them pertaining to security questions. It is impossible to ignore the fact that 40,000 people or more have lost their lives in Mexico over a period of time, and that also has to leave an impression. But my overall view is that this is a country of phenomenal potential, phenomenal vibrancy, and phenomenal warmth. It is impossible not to be attracted to that.

*Do you regret the way you had to leave?*

Of course, one has to regret a situation that creates tensions and requires someone—in this case required me—to make the personal assessment about how to most effectively contribute to the relationship. Nobody wants to be in that situation. But I don't regret having made that choice, because it was the right one and it was a constructive decision. There is a phenomenal ambassador there now, Tony Wayne,<sup>22</sup> somebody I've known for a long time, have worked with in different capacities, and for whom I have tremendous respect. I'm proud that we have continued the tradition of having some of our best diplomats, whether from the foreign service or outside, serving in this position, because it's one of great responsibility and importance to both of our countries.

*Do you think the way you were treated by Calderón was unfair?*

Fair is not a consideration. When you are a professional diplomat, you work to serve the interests of your country, and in this particular circumstance it became clear the best way to do that would be to resign.

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<sup>22</sup> Earl Anthony Wayne assumed office as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in August 2011 and presented his credentials to Calderón in September.

## U.S. ENVOYS AND AMBASSADORS TO MEXICO 1823-2011

ANDREW JACKSON	<b>1823-</b> declined appointment
NINIAN EDWARDS	<b>1824-</b> did not proceed to post
JOEL ROBERTS POINSETT	<b>1825-</b> recall requested by Mexico
ANTHONY BUTLER	<b>1829-</b> recall requested by Mexico
POWHATAN ELLIS	<b>1836-1836</b>
POWHATAN ELLIS	<b>1839-1842</b>
WADDY THOMPSON	<b>1842-1844</b>
WILSON SHANNON	<b>1844-1845</b>
JOHN SLIDELL	<b>1845-1846</b>
NATHAN CLIFFORD	<b>1848-1849</b>
ROBERT PERKINS LETCHER	<b>1849-1852</b>
ALFRED CONKLING	<b>1852-1853</b>
JAMES GADSDEN	<b>1853-1856</b>
JOHN FORSYTH	<b>1856-1858</b>
ROBERT MILLIGAN MCLANE	<b>1859-1860</b>
JOHN B. WELLER	<b>1860-1861</b>
THOMAS CORWIN	<b>1861-1864</b>
JOHN ALEXANDER LOGAN	<b>1865-</b> declined appointment
LEWIS DAVIS CAMPBELL	<b>1866-</b> did not present credentials
MARCUS OTTERBOURG	<b>1867-1867</b>
WILLIAM STARKE ROSECRANS	<b>1868-1869</b>
THOMAS HENRY NELSON	<b>1869-1873</b>
JOHN WATSON FOSTER	<b>1873-1880</b>
PHILIP HICKY MORGAN	<b>1880-1885</b>
HENRY ROOTES JACKSON	<b>1885-1886</b>
THOMAS COURTLAND MANNING	<b>1886-1887</b>
EDWARD STUYVESANT BRAGG	<b>1888-1889</b>
THOMAS RYAN	<b>1889-1893</b>

ISAAC PUSEY GRAY	<b>1893-1894</b>
MATTHEW WHITAKER RANSOM	<b>1895-1895</b>
MATTHEW WHITAKER RANSOM	<b>1895-1897</b>
POWELL CLAYTON	<b>1897-</b> promoted to Ambassador
POWELL CLAYTON	<b>1898-1905</b>
EDWIN HURD CONGER	<b>1905-1905</b>
DAVID EUGENE THOMPSON	<b>1906-1909</b>
HENRY LANE WILSON	<b>1909-1913</b>
HENRY PRATHER FLETCHER	<b>1916-1919</b>
CHARLES BEECHER WARREN	<b>1924-1924</b>
JAMES ROCKWELL SHEFFIELD	<b>1924-1927</b>
DWIGHT WHITNEY MORROW	<b>1927-1930</b>
JOSHUA REUBEN CLARK	<b>1930-1933</b>
JOSEPHUS DANIELS	<b>1933-1941</b>
GEORGE STRAUSSER MESSERSMITH	<b>1941-1946</b>
WALTER CLARENCE THURSTON	<b>1946-1950</b>
WILLIAM O'DWYER	<b>1950-1952</b>
FRANCIS WHITE	<b>1953-1957</b>
ROBERT CHARLES HILL	<b>1957-1960</b>
THOMAS CLIFTON MAN	<b>1961-1963</b>
FULTON FREEMAN	<b>1964-1969</b>
ROBERT HENRY MCBRIDE	<b>1969-1974</b>
JOSEPH JOHN JOVA	<b>1973-1977</b>
PATRICK JOSEPH LUCEY	<b>1977-1979</b>
JULIAN NAVA	<b>1980-1981</b>
JOHN A. GAVIN	<b>1981-1986</b>
CHARLES J. PILLIOD	<b>1986-1989</b>
JOHN DIMITRI NEGROPONTE	<b>1989-1993</b>
JAMES ROBERT JONES	<b>1993-1997</b>
WILLIAM F. WELD	<b>1997-</b> nomination withdrawn
JEFFREY S. DAVIDOW	<b>1998-2002</b>
ANTONIO O. GARZA	<b>2002-2009</b>
CARLOS PASCUAL	<b>2009-2011</b>
EARL ANTHONY WAYNE	<b>2011-</b>

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dolia Estévez is a senior Mexico correspondent and foreign affairs analyst in Washington, D.C. She is a regular commentator for Mexico's *Noticias MVS* and a contributor to *Poder Magazine*. From 1989 to 2005, she was the Washington Correspondent for *El Financiero* and *Radio Monitor*. She serves as a senior advisor for the U.S.-Mexico Journalism Initiative at the Woodrow Wilson Center. In 2010, she authored "Protecting Press Freedom in an Environment of Violence and Impunity in Mexico," a chapter in *Shared Responsibility*, published by the Wilson Center. She has lectured at public and private institutions in Mexico and the United States. She is an accredited correspondent with the Department of State, Capitol Hill and the Foreign Press Center, and a member of Mexico's Council on Foreign Relations.











**DOLIA ESTÉVEZ** has lucidly and brilliantly compiled a revealing insight into U.S.-Mexico ties covering a period of gradual redefinition of the prickly relationship. This oral history of American envoys illustrates how Mexico stood apart from the rest of Latin America in a most critical time-frame as seen by Washington's "men in Mexico." The significance of these interviews is that they portray U.S. Ambassadors as true "pro-consuls" who invariably managed the bilateral relationship... surprisingly Mexico has not yet learned that to be a true and mature equal partner of the U.S., Mexico's "man" in Washington should lead the bilateral agenda just as every important and powerful country does.

*Ambassador Cris Arcos, former Senior U.S. career diplomat*

**U.S. AMBASSADORS TO MEXICO, THE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THEIR EYES** is as exciting as a political thriller to anyone interested in U.S.-Mexican relations and Mexican political development since the 1970s. Readers owe **DOLIA ESTÉVEZ**, who has used her extensive, first-hand professional knowledge of events and personalities, a huge debt of gratitude for her perceptive and insightful questions and answers which shed much new light on one of the most influential actors in a critically significant bilateral relationship and on the general role of ambassadors in U.S. foreign policy.

*Roderic Ai Camp, author of Mexican Political Biographies, 1939-2009*

**DOLIA ESTÉVEZ'S BOOK** offers a revealing behind-the-scenes look at U.S. policy toward Mexico, with former American ambassadors speaking with surprising candor about their exchanges with Mexican leaders and their own government. These in-depth interviews provide new details about the crises and successes in the relationship -- NAFTA, the drug wars, the 1994 peso crisis -- and reveal how each country tries to influence the other. The book will be of immense value both to historians and to those trying to understand how U.S. policy toward Mexico is made.

*Mary Beth Sheridan, The Washington Post, editor*