

CONVOCATION 4.0

# REPORT

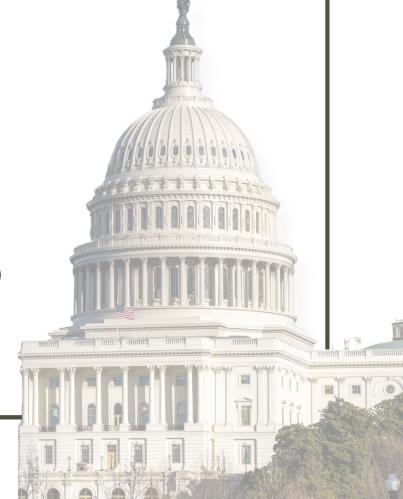
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### **ABOUT THE PROGRAM**

Convocation is a program spearheaded by the U.S.-Mexico Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute. It is the only program uniting former ambassadors from the United States to Mexico and from Mexico to the United States to tackle the pressing issues of the bilateral relationship head-on.

Over one to four days, these ambassadors engage in off-the-record critical discussions on vital topics such as the strategic alignment of North American economies, migration and labor mobility, workforce development, public security, and the power of soft diplomacy. From these discussions, actionable recommendations and strategies for strengthening binational relationships are formulated and compiled into a comprehensive report, which is subsequently presented to legislators and federal governments in the region.

You can review past reports below:

- Convocation 1.0 (2019)
- Convocation 2.0 (2021)
- Convocation's Panel at the North Capital Forum 2022
- Convocation 3.0 (2023)



### U.S.-MEXICO FOUNDATION

The U.S. Mexico Foundation (USMF) is a binational non-profit organization dedicated to fostering cooperation and bilateral understanding between the United States and Mexico. Rooted in the North America Free Trade Agreement and launched in 2009 with seed funds from the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and the Business Foundation in Mexico (Fundemex), the USMF is governed by a bi-national board of business and civic leaders with extensive networks in the U.S. and Mexico.

The USMF started a new chapter with a compelling agenda focused on policy and advocacy, creating new strategic alliances, educating important stakeholders and providing a voice on the most relevant issues pertaining the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

### MEXICO INSTITUTE

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Chartered by Congress in 1968, The Wilson Center is the nation's key non-partisan policy forum. The Wilson Center tackles global issues through independent research and open dialogue to inform actionable ideas for the policy community. The Wilson Center's Mexico Institute seeks to improve understanding, communication, and cooperation between Mexico and the United States by promoting original research, encouraging public discussion, and proposing policy options for enhancing the bilateral relationship.





### **AMBASSADORS**

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## INTRODUCTION

On December 3, 2024, the U.S.-Mexico Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute hosted the fourth edition of the Convocation program, coined Convocation 4.0. This event brought together thirteen former American, Canadian, and Mexican ambassadors to the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, along with two current ambassadors and various experts, in Washington, D.C.

Since its inception in 2020, Convocation has served as a unique platform for indepth debate and thoughtful analysis of pressing issues for North America. The program aims to facilitate off-the-record discussions among ambassadors and key stakeholders who influence regional cooperation. With new administrations in the U.S. and Mexico -and most likely a new one in Canada- this year's Convocation agenda focused discussions on key aspects of bilateral and trilateral relationships.

The three countries of North America are facing a period of challenge today, with clear concerns in each nation about the pillars of cooperation essential to the unity that gives the region its unique strength. How to deal with the complex migration, trade, and public security issues can only be adequately addressed by greater cooperation. New administrations in each of the three countries will seek to review the relationship, maintaining those elements that function well and those that can be improved on. This report, resulting from an in-depth conversation with experienced diplomats and experts, offers guidance for the immediate and long-term future.

The report offers a general overview of the discussions and context of the gathering, followed by a set of recommendations. It is important to note that this document is not meant to serve as an academic or policy report; instead, it provides a written record of the varied perspectives shared during the event. Additionally, while the document may not capture the views of every participant, it seeks to convey the general tone of the discussions and the conclusions reached.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The first set of discussions centered on trade, supply chain integration, and the various challenges related to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) ahead of the 2026 review process. Key issues highlighted included USMCA implementation, compliance, and the economic effects of imposing tariffs. Participants emphasized that the trilateral agreement is the cornerstone of North American relations and has played a crucial role in regional prosperity, which should be strengthened rather than weakened. It was also noted that the USMCA enhances supply chain integration, essential for regional competitiveness vis-à-vis China and other global economic blocs.

Migration and labor mobility also took center stage as participants delved into the dynamic trends and the often challenging journeys faced by individuals moving within and from beyond the Western Hemisphere. There was a strong consensus that migration policies need to be humane, efficient, safe, legal, and orderly. The group underscored the critical need to combat human smuggling and trafficking, recognizing the vulnerabilities that drive individuals to migrate irregularly.

More importantly, the conversation shifted towards collaboratively tackling the root causes of migration and the need to establish strategic partnerships with countries of origin. Another key topic was creating legal pathways for migration to fill labor shortages and harness the vast economic potential that labor and demographic complementarities offer. Together, the participants envisioned a future where migration can be managed securely and effectively, benefiting societies and economies.

The dialogue on security stressed increased cooperation as a foundational principle of North American security relations. The participants agreed that all three nations must accept a shared responsibility as a cornerstone in combating transnational criminal organizations and the production and distribution particularly of synthetic opioids, including fentanyl. Participants firmly advocated for better coordination among agencies at all levels of government to effectively address security threats and counter the influence of non state actors. There was a collective conviction that robust collaborative efforts are essential for deepening mutual trust and developing innovative solutions, ensuring a safer and more secure future for the region and its citizens.

The final round of discussions focused on educational and North American trusted traveler programs and the promotion of tourism and culture as tools to foster

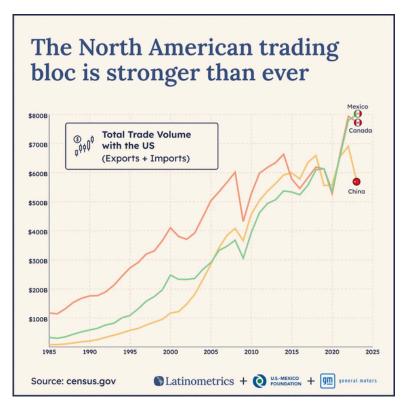
human connections and reciprocal understanding. Issues such as financial challenges, safety concerns -especially regarding Mexico- and strategies to increase student mobility among the three countries were discussed. The ambassadors said that the FIFA World Cup 2026<sup>TM</sup>, jointly hosted by the three North American countries and expected to be the largest in history, will serve as a powerful platform to promote understanding and close ties within the region, elevating its prominence on the global stage.

#### a. Trade and the USMCA

The session began with a discussion on the intricate relationship between trade dynamics, supply chain integration, and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) as the backbone for shared prosperity. The USMCA, which traces back to the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has established the world's largest free trade bloc when measured by Gross Domestic Product.

Since the USMCA was implemented, the region has witnessed an increase in trade, investment, and job creation. Mexico and Canada have become the U.S.'s first and second-largest trading partners, respectively, surpassing trade with China and strengthening North America. Last year marked the first time in 20 years that the United States imported more goods from Mexico than from China.

Figure 1.- Total Trade Volume with the U.S.: Canada, Mexico, and China (1985-2023)



Source: Latinometrics, U.S.-Mexico Foundation, and General Motors (2024). Mexico and the US: The World's Largest Trade Relationship. <a href="https://latinometrics.substack.com/p/deep-dive-the-worlds-largest-trade?utm\_source=post-email-true&r=3vtz/l&triedRedirect=true">https://latinometrics.substack.com/p/deep-dive-the-worlds-largest-trade?utm\_source=post-email-true&r=3vtz/l&triedRedirect=true</a>







A USMCA Policy Brief noted that by 2023, trade within North America had exceeded USD 1.88 trillion, averaging about 3.6 million dollars exchanged per minute. In terms of investment, Canada and the U.S. emerged as major destinations for foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2023, attracting \$311 billion and \$50 billion, respectively, while Mexico secured \$37 billion in FDI, half of which came from North American partners. This remarkable level of integration highlights the unique strengths of North America, capable of promoting collaboration and growth in a rapidly changing global economy.

Despite its success, the threat posed by imposing tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada has raised concerns about potential disruptions to the region. Leveraging non-trade issues, such as migration and security, as negotiation tools ahead of the 2026 USMCA review has sparked worries about how to respond to the threat of tariffs. While policy de-linkage is essential in preventing cross-contamination of complex, broad and deep policy agendas and non-trade issues should be addressed separately through various institutional mechanisms, concerns remain that migration and organized crime will continue to overshadow other key trilateral priorities as the USMCA 2026 revision approaches.

As discussions unfolded, it became evident that shifting public perceptions of trade in the U.S., increasingly marked by anti-globalization sentiments, pose significant challenges for policymakers and leaders. A Pew Research Center survey reported that 59% of Americans believe the United States is at a disadvantage when considering the costs and benefits of increased trade with other countries. Global trade ranked near the bottom of the 20 policy goals reviewed.<sup>2</sup>

Various ambassadors emphasized the importance of strong leadership to better inform public perceptions and unify stakeholders in a complex and evolving political landscape. Among these stakeholders, private sector leaders should assume a more active role in advocating against tariff increases and fostering regional collaboration. This call to action demonstrates a growing recognition of the vital need for companies to engage in policy discussions that affect their interests and operations.

Some participants insisted that the immediate pressures from increasing tariffs imposed on Chinese goods are representative of the need to counter China's influence in the region. While some emphasized the urgency of addressing current economic concerns, others warned against losing sight of the long-term implications of such actions on the broader trade environment. These contrasting perspectives underscored a fundamental tension in trade policy deliberations,

<sup>1</sup> Source: Latinometrics, U.S.-Mexico Foundation, and General Motors (2024). Mexico and the US: The World's Largest Trade Relationship. <a href="https://latinometrics.substack.com/p/deep-dive-the-worlds-largest-trade?utm\_source=post-email-title&publication\_id=527909&post\_id=145343717&utm\_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=3vtzrl&triedRedirect=true</a>
2 Gracia, Shanay. "Majority of Americans Take a Dim View of Increased Trade with Other Countries." Pew Research Center, 29 July 2024, <a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/29/majority-of-americans-take-a-dim-view-of-increased-trade-with-other-countries/">https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/29/majority-of-americans-take-a-dim-view-of-increased-trade-with-other-countries/</a>.





with some calling for swift responses to current crises while others advocated for a more strategic, long-term approach.

The nature of Canada's role within this trilateral framework was also discussed. Several participants referred to the challenges posed by Canada's evolving political environment that risk affecting adversely effective collaboration between Canada and Mexico. Fostering open and multilevel dialogue between the two countries is vital in order to reinvigorate ties which have weakened over recent years.

A proposal emerged to establish a high-level regional committee addressing shared concerns such as infrastructure development, migration management, and vetting Chinese investment in North America. This ambitious initiative would foster a long-term vision for regional integration, ensuring that Mexico and Canada can effectively navigate complex challenges and external pressures while allowing the US to maintain its strengths going forward in cooperation with its neighbors.

In closing, the session underscored the need for strong leadership and active public engagement to implement the proposed measures. It emphasized the critical need for Mexico and Canada to overcome their recent lack of engagement and form a unified front against protectionist trade shifts. The engagement of the private sector, coupled with a clear commitment to regional integration, remains vital for North America's long-term success.

The ambassadors recommended cultivating a shared vision for North America that aligns with regional interests and prioritizing collaboration to address pressing issues effectively. By doing so, all three countries can enhance their partnership and tackle current multifaceted challenges. The economic benefits reaped by NAFTA, and now the USMCA, must be preserved and strengthened to ensure continued growth, cooperation, and prosperity. All three countries can benefit significantly from this approach.





Table 1. Recommendations Summary on Trade and the USMCA

With trade volumes reaching unprecedented heights, the discussions highlighted the crucial role of the USMCA in strengthening regional trade and economic relationships. However, strong leadership is essential to address potential challenges such as changing public perceptions and policy shifts.

#### Actionable Recommendations:

- 1.Strengthen Supply Chain Integration: Enhance collaboration to minimize reliance on non-regional partners and ensure resilience against global trade disruptions.
- 2. Engage the Private Sector: Mobilize business leaders to participate in dialogues and actively advocate against protectionist policies.
- 3. Promote Public Awareness: Develop strategic campaigns highlighting the economic benefits of the USMCA to garner public support.

#### b Migration and Labor Mobility

Immigration has become a significant concern in the United States as record numbers of asylum seekers and migrants continue to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border through both legal and unlawful channels. The session shed light on the trends and challenges faced by individuals in the Western Hemisphere and beyond. It began with an overview of shifting migration patterns and the incoming U.S. administration's plans to carry out mass deportations to address unauthorized immigration. The session underscored the importance of immigrants' contributions to demographics, labor shortages, economic vitality, and culture.

Data on remittances challenge the notion that immigrants drain financial resources from the U.S. economy. The Center for Latin America and Latino Studies (CLALS) at American University reports that immigrants who sent remittances contributed approximately \$2.2 trillion to the U.S. economy in 2022, accounting for approximately 8 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Future policies on migration should simultaneously recognize the economic value of immigrants and the need for enforcement measures.<sup>3</sup>

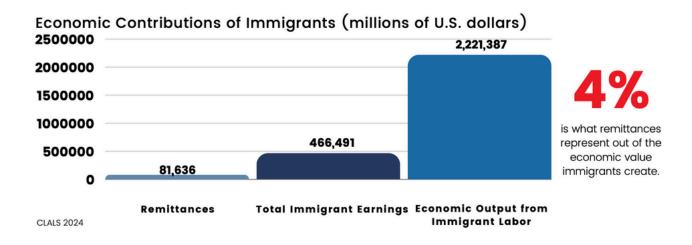
<sup>3</sup> Castañeda, Ernesto, Edgar Aguilar, and Natalie Turkington. "Migration as a Driver of Economic Growth: Increasing Productivity and Filling Labor Gaps." Center for Latin America and Latino Studies (CLALS), 2024, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\_id=47409258\_\_cf\_chl\_tk=aXbZWlpzj5v8vOCbtXa0aQAC8m\_03PP5Wrotrddr4.E-1714442208-0.0.1.1-1663.







Figure 2.- Economic Contributions of Immigrants to the U.S.



Note: Since U.S. GDP in 2023 was \$27.35 trillion USD, CLALS's estimation at American University of \$2.22 trillion USD of immigrants' economic labor output sustains the 8% claim of representation in total economic activity. Source: Direct representation of CLALS cited working paper in footnote 3.

Amid a complex global scenario of rising displacement, the participants emphasized the need to reevaluate current pathways for asylum so that they can better respond to the diverse backgrounds of migrants. They also stressed the need for humanitarian protection systems. A recent report from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) highlights that the U.S. asylum system faces record demands during significant global displacement, resulting in a backlog of more than 2 million asylum applications.<sup>4</sup>

Mexico has also experienced a historic rise in asylum applications and has transitioned from being primarily a country of origin and transit to a destination -if not by choice, then as a result of ongoing immigration enforcement policies- for asylum seekers. In 2023, over 140,000 individuals from more than a hundred nationalities sought refuge in Mexico—an increase of 17 percent from the previous year. In this context, formalizing a "safe third country" policy under the paradigm of shared responsibility can be discussed as one of the potential solutions to this challenge, similar to arrangements between Turkey and the European Union.

Further analysis focused on the challenges related to the announced mass deportations of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., emphasizing the potential legal, logistical, financial, and administrative burdens that record-high expulsions could have on the agencies that manage these processes. Ethical concerns and human rights implications were discussed. The participants indicated that a nuanced strategy is essential to address the repercussions of returning individuals to their home countries.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "México: Esperanza de un Nuevo Hogar 2023. Principales Resultados - ACNUR México." 2024, https://www.acnur.org/mx/media/mexico-esperanza-de-un-nuevo-hogar-2023-principales-resultados-acnur-mexico.





<sup>4</sup> Bush-Joseph, Kathleen. "Outmatched: The U.S. Asylum System Faces Record Demands." Migration Policy Institute, 2024, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/outmatched-us-asylum-system.

Economic concerns were thoroughly discussed, as deportations can significantly harm local and national economies. When migrants are removed, industries dependent on their skills may experience disruptions. The deportation costs, including legal fees and enforcement expenses, can burden public resources. Additionally, communities face direct financial losses and decreased consumer spending by deported individuals and their families.

Recognizing these challenges, initiatives like labor mobility programs, enhanced cross-border collaboration, and consular agreements that leverage the extensive consular network of the three nations are essential for advocating a multifaceted approach. Notably, Mexico's consular network in the United States is the largest in the world. A holistic strategy would not only mitigate the potential economic fallout of deportations but also reinforce the importance of protecting migrants' human rights.

By reassessing current systems and fostering trilateral cooperation, the United States, Mexico, and Canada can effectively navigate the complex dynamics of migration. Given the dynamic nature of the global landscape, the potential for establishing a more structured and cooperative migration framework is vital for the security and prosperity of all three countries. Mishandling of these issues can have significantly negative consequences for each of the three countries - this must be handled with careful attention to the economic and human consequences for each country and the region.

Table 2. Recommendations Summary on Migration and Labor Mobility

Migration and labor mobility are essential for regional prosperity.
Acknowledging migrants' economic contributions emphasizes the need for humane and efficient policies.

#### Actionable Recommendations:

- 1.Develop Circular Legal Migration
  Pathways: Implement programs that
  address labor shortages while
  recognizing demographic
  complementarities.
- 2. Strengthen Human Rights Protections: Facilitate cross-border collaboration to create safe and orderly migration.
- 3.Enhance Consular Agreements: Improve cross-border support mechanisms to ensure smoother transitions and protect migrants' human rights.

#### c. International Exchange

International exchange fosters meaningful human connections and enhances mutual understanding. The North American Competitiveness Council highlights that increasing educational exchanges is vital for developing the invaluable skills that the region's labor force needs to succeed in the future. Nevertheless, student mobility among the three countries has dwindled in recent years. Student exchanges enhance economic and social interconnections, which should not be hindered by policies that increase financial barriers.

The session started by underscoring the need to address a significant gap in student exchange participation and to expand educational exchange programs throughout North America. To provide context, the 2024 'Open Doors' report by the Institute of International Education reveals that in 2023-2024, China sent nearly 277,000 students to the U.S., compared to Canada's 29,000 and Mexico's 15,000.<sup>6</sup>

These figures sparked calls for raising awareness among policymakers about the profound benefits of educational exchanges and the need for increased federal support to address the financial challenges that many students face when pursuing education in the U.S. Various proposals were put forward to explore innovative funding options, such as issuing bonds for long-term projects, inspired by the successful Erasmus Program that has helped millions of students in Europe study abroad. Additionally, the idea of creating trilateral scholarship programs centered on North American studies was suggested, as it would nurture a new generation of experts across various sectors that have a shared North American perspective.

Participants also referred to the importance of addressing misconceptions surrounding safety in Mexico by promoting awareness of safer regions and distinguishing between varying levels of violence. A U.S. State Department report highlights that, although certain areas face safety challenges, many regions are safe and welcoming for travelers and students. Effectively marketing these areas is key to dispelling stereotypes that obstruct student exchange opportunities.

Moreover, integrating cultural tourism and sports programs into public education is essential, as it can strengthen regional ties, help students cultivate a sense of belonging, and promote personal relationships. The upcoming 2026 World Cup offers a valuable opportunity to encourage student exchanges, with a strong focus on engaging youth and local governments.



<sup>6</sup> Institute of International Education. "The Open Doors 2024 Annual Data Release." 2024, https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/all-places-of-origin/.

Table 3. Recommendations Summary on International Exchange

Educational exchanges are vital for fostering a sense of North American belonging. Despite barriers, there is widespread agreement that increasing student mobility is necessary in North American countries.

#### Actionable Recommendations:

- 1.Expand Scholarship Programs: To foster a new generation of regional experts, a trilateral scholarship program focused on North American studies should be established.
- Leverage High-Profile Events: Use opportunities like the FIFA World Cup
   2026 to boost cultural exchanges and tourism.
- 3. Address Safety Concerns: Promote accurate information about safety and exchange opportunities in Mexico to challenge stereotypes and encourage student mobility.

#### d. Security

The security session of Convocation 4.0 addressed the complex and pervasive threats posed by transnational organized criminal groups. Central to this dialogue was the escalating fentanyl crisis, which has emerged as a significant public health challenge in the region.

Participants raised concerns about notable gaps in coordination between various government agencies, particularly in inter-agency collaboration across North America. While cooperation at the presidential and cabinet levels is generally strong, bolstering communication and collaboration at the intermediate and operational levels is urgent.

Participants emphasized the urgent need to strengthen Canada-Mexico security dialogues so that both nations can develop a unified strategy to face shared threats. The weakening of State authority and security vulnerability to organized crime in some regions of Mexico was a significant point in these discussions.

Several key recommendations were proposed to address security challenges, including enhancing intelligence-sharing protocols and implementing effective trust-building measures among agencies and governments to facilitate cooperation. Expanding military-to-military cooperation was also advocated, as it can strengthen ties and enhance operational capacities. One of the key challenges that exist. This will take continued hard work by all three countries.

Additional recommendations included creating cross-border joint training programs specifically designed for law enforcement agencies to improve the skills and readiness of frontline workers in combating organized crime. There was strong agreement on enhancing data sharing and analytical capabilities, vital for effectively identifying and disrupting sophisticated criminal networks operating across borders and in cyberspace.

The session concluded with a broad consensus on the need to revisit and thoroughly reassess existing institutional collaboration mechanisms and prior initiatives, such as the Mérida Initiative, which established a new architecture for the U.S.– Mexican security cooperation and aimed to tackle regional security concerns. The ambassadors also advocated formulating innovative and more effective strategies to address the three nations' shared security threats.

A recurring theme in the discussions was the importance of coordinating a holistic and integrated approach to the threat posed by transnational organized crime. This led to calls for detailed evaluations of existing security frameworks and the design of a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy, articulated on the cornerstone of our three-way relationship, shared responsibility- that involves collaboration among all three countries, recognizing that solutions in one domain often have significant implications for others.

Table 4. Recommendations Summary on Security

Security cooperation remains a cornerstone of regional stability, with a focus on combating transnational organized crime and the fentanyl crisis.

#### Actionable Recommendations:

- 1.Enhance Intelligence Sharing: Strengthen communication channels among regional agencies to improve response coordination.
- 2.Foster Bilateral Relationships: Promote Canada-Mexico cooperation to address shared security threats and keep enhancing means for three way discussions and deepening relationships.
- 3. Reevaluate Existing Initiatives: Review and adapt existing cooperation mechanisms and initiatives to ensure strategic relevance and effectiveness. With strategic threats impacting all three partners, greater and more effective trilateral cooperation is needed.

## CONCLUSIONS

With decades of combined experience in diplomacy, policy, and the private sector, the fourth Convocation event of Canadian, American, and Mexican ambassadors focused on critical discussions regarding the economy, security, migration, and international student exchanges; taking into account policy shifts from new administrations in Mexico and the U.S., as well as Canada's upcoming 2025 national elections. Building on earlier gatherings, Convocation 4.0 concentrated on discussing and seeking collaborative efforts to enhance regional prosperity and security. The discussions produced key recommendations, showcasing a complex yet promising path for the North American region.

Convocation 4.0 concluded with a commitment to sharing these recommendations and nurturing a collaborative environment that enhances the North American community and ongoing dialogue. By leveraging collective expertise and resources, the region can capitalize on its strengths, address current challenges, and pave the way for a more integrated and prosperous future.





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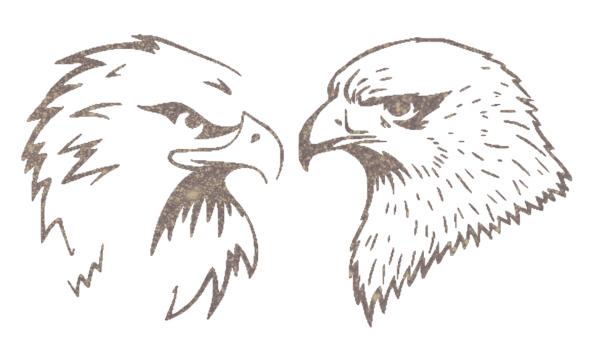
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