

# Mexico, A Challenging Assignment

U.S. AMBASSADORS SHARE  
THEIR EXPERIENCES



**Dolia Estévez**

 Wilson  
Center

 Mexico  
Institute



# Mexico, A Challenging Assignment

U.S. AMBASSADORS SHARE  
THEIR EXPERIENCES

**Dolia Estévez**





**The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars** was chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1968 as the living memorial to the nation's twenty-eighth president. It serves as the country's key nonpartisan policy forum, tackling global challenges through independent research and open dialogue. Bridging the worlds of academia and public policy, the Center's diverse programmatic activity informs actionable ideas for Congress, the administration, and the broader policy community. Please visit us online at [www.wilsoncenter.org](http://www.wilsoncenter.org).

### **Ambassador Mark Green, Director, President, & CEO**

#### **Board of Trustees**

*Bill Haslam, Chair; Drew Maloney, Vice Chair; **Private Citizen Members:** Nicholas Adams, Thelma Duggin, Brian H. Hook, David Jacobson, Timothy Pataki, Alan N. Rechtschaffen, Hon. Louis Susman; **Public Members:** Antony Blinken, Secretary, U.S. Department of State; Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution; Miguel Cardona, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education; David Ferriero, Archivist of the United States; Carla D. Hayden, Librarian of Congress; Shelly Lowe, Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities*

**The 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. Please visit us online at [www.wilsoncenter.org/program/mexico-institute](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/mexico-institute).

#### **Available from:**

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027  
[wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)

© 2022, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

ISBN: 978-1-7359401-8-2

Cover image: Fernando Luna Arce. U.S. Embassy in Mexico City

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	5
<b>Prologue</b>	
Andrew I. Rudman .....	6
<b>Introduction</b>	
Dolia Estévez .....	8
<b>1 Patrick J. Lucey</b> .....	17
<b>2 Julian Nava</b> .....	35
<b>3 John A. Gavin</b> .....	51
<b>4 Charles J. Pilliod Jr.</b> .....	69
<b>5 John D. Negroponte</b> .....	75
<b>6 James R. Jones</b> .....	97
<b>7 Jeffrey Davidow</b> .....	119
<b>8 Antonio O. Garza Jr.</b> .....	139
<b>9 Carlos Pascual</b> .....	157
<b>10 Earl Anthony Wayne</b> .....	175
<b>11 Roberta S. Jacobson</b> .....	203
<b>12 Christopher Landau</b> .....	231
<b>U.S. Envoys and Ambassadors to Mexico 1823-2022</b> .....	260
<b>About the Author</b> .....	263



To the memory of the many Mexican journalists who have lost their lives for doing their job in a country where it's more dangerous to investigate crimes than to commit them.

# Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Mexico Institute, especially Director Andrew Rudman, Program Assistant Cecily Fasanella, and Ambassador Earl Anthony Wayne, Public Policy Fellow, for their interest and assistance in producing *MEXICO, A CHALLENGING ASSIGNMENT: U.S. Ambassadors Share Their Experiences*. This new volume is the second edition of *U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico, The Relationship Through Their Eyes*, published by the Mexico Institute a decade ago. It incorporates three new interviews—with Ambassadors Wayne, Roberta S. Jacobson, and Christopher Landau; an updated introduction; and a new title. I also wish to thank Susan Brady Maitra, for editing parts of the manuscript, and my husband W. Stuart Pettingell, for helping me transcribe long hours of interviews.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to each and every one of the ambassadors whose testimonies constitute the centerpiece of this volume: Patrick J. Lucey, Julian Nava, John A. Gavin, John D. Negroponete, James R. Jones, Jeffrey Davidow, Antonio O. Garza, Carlos Pascual, Earl Anthony Wayne, Roberta S. Jacobson, and Christopher Landau. Without their forthright responses and patience with my questions, this volume would not have been possible.



# Prologue

Andrew I. Rudman, Mexico Institute Director

It is likely that no bilateral relationship has greater impact on the lives of American citizens than the relationship between the United States and Mexico. One of the United States' oldest formal relationships, the United States and Mexico have maintained diplomatic relations since 1822 when the U.S. had formal diplomatic relationships with only ten other countries. Neighbors as a result of geography but partners by choice, our countries have developed deeply integrated societies linked by commerce and trade, culture, language, history, cross-border emergency response, and innumerable other ways at local, regional, and national levels over the past two centuries. Our trade relationship has grown as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its successor agreement, the United States – Mexico – Canada – Agreement (USMCA) such that both countries are the others' major trading partner with goods crossing the border at a rate of more than \$1 million/minute and 515,000 individual border crossings of people going to school, work, and play in both directions. Government and civil society representatives routinely cross the border (virtually, if not physically) on a near-daily basis to resolve issues and promote growth and development in both countries.

As the COVID-19 pandemic painfully illustrated, the challenges facing our peoples cannot be resolved unilaterally nor solely within national boundaries. Rather, challenges such as pandemic response, climate change, drugs and arms trafficking, and drug abuse must be addressed collaboratively if we are to create the societies to which we aspire. While the relationship has at times been contentious (as is normal between neighbors), it has withstood the test of time and led to the creation, with Canada, of one of the most dynamic regions in the world.

The U.S. and Mexican ambassadors frequently occupy the fulcrum of this relationship and normally serve as the first point of contact between the respective presidents, cabinet officers, and bureaucracies. Charged with leading one of their nation's most important diplomatic missions, they develop and convey a broad understanding of the myriad of ways in which our countries engage. In doing so, they ensure that the relationship stays on a steady keel, facilitating the resolution of disputes and disagreements



without undermining the overall relationship or impeding progress in other, unrelated, areas. They also serve as “translators” highlighting the impact of foreign policy actions on the domestic political context from which they emanate, adding nuance and detail to media reporting, and other sources of information available to the executive and legislative branches.

As might be expected, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico often plays a more visible, though no more critical, role in the bilateral relationship than the Mexican counterpart. In this, the second volume of Dolia Estévez’ 2012 publication, “U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico: The Relationship through Their Eyes,” the critical role of the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico is underscored through interviews with the three most recent office holders. The roughly one decade covered during their tenures represents one of the most complex in the history of the bilateral relationship. These ambassadors, two career and one a political appointee, addressed a range of challenges including tense moments in the security relationship, abrupt domestic political transitions that changed national trajectories, and the emergence of the worst global pandemic in a century.

Ms. Estévez’ interviews chronicle three very different experiences defined by very different relationships with the U.S. and Mexican presidents. We learn from these accounts how the U.S. Ambassador can help to advance the relationship even during contentious moments, and the consequences of managing the relationship directly between the White House and Los Pinos or the Palacio Nacional rather than via the ambassador. It is our hope that the lessons shared by the ambassadors, in their own words, will contribute to a greater understanding of this critical bilateral relationship for students, scholars, analysts, and, perhaps especially, for future U.S. ambassadors to Mexico. If so, and thanks to the work and commitment of the author, the Mexico Institute will have fulfilled its mission to improve understanding, communication, and cooperation between Mexico and the United States.



# Introduction

Dolia Estévez

Throughout history, U.S. ambassadors have been a vital bridge between the United States and host countries where they serve. They are Washington's highest representatives and the top interlocutors with foreign governments and their societies. Ambassadors are the United States' "eyes and ears" around the world. They report and explain events on the ground and are the first line of defense for American interests abroad. When needed, they can expand their traditional diplomatic role to secure much-needed intelligence. Even in today's real time information age, ambassadors' firsthand knowledge and on-the-ground assessments can be 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 critical actors in bilateral relations generally, they are even more so in the United States' 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, investment, and immigration issues than any other two countries. Mexico also accounts for 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. diplomatic mission in Mexico was the largest in the world. Today it remains among the top five. The total number of American and Mexican employees in the U.S. mission in Mexico—at the embassy on Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City and in consulates around the country—is estimated at between 2,500 and 3,000. This includes employees from more than thirty U.S. federal departments and agencies. With a total of nine consulates general—located in Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Matamoros, Mérida, Monterrey, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, and Tijuana—Mexico leads the world in number of U.S. consulates.

The American ambassador is in charge of overseeing this massive assemblage and operation. He or she is responsible for coordinating their activities, watching out for their safety, and guaranteeing they operate within the rules of diplomatic engagement. He or she has the authority to recall any member of their staff they deem unfit for the task.

U.S.-Mexico diplomatic relations were established on December 12, 1822, when President James Monroe received José Manuel Zozaya as Mexican Minister to the United States. Joel R. Poinsett became the first U.S. envoy to Mexico in 1825. More than twenty envoys and chargé d'affaires served in Mexico during subsequent decades, which were marked by numerous hostilities, including the Mexican-American war, and the severing of diplomatic relations. In 1898, the rank of the American representative in Mexico was elevated from envoy to ambassador. Powell Clayton thus became the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico have often been contentious. The power and proximity of the United States make it an easy target for old and new grievances. Mexicans have not forgotten past American military interventions and the loss of half of their territory to the United States. Anti-American sentiments in Mexico can become strident in times of political disagreement. 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 Mexican Revolution, are perhaps the least liked U.S. ambassadors in the history of the relationship.

In the United States, ambassadors are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Selection of the ambassador to Mexico can be challenging. The uniqueness of the relationship requires 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 in light of more pressing considerations. Because Mexico and Mexicans have become part of the U.S.' domestic political and electoral narrative, selecting an ambassador to Mexico is, perhaps more than other countries, a balancing act between competing domestic and foreign policy priorities, as can be seen in the 45-year period covered in this book.

At a time when Washington was desperate for Mexico to increase its oil output due to instability in the Middle East and anti-Americanism in Iran, President James Carter chose Patrick J. Lucey, the governor of Wisconsin, as a way 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 in an effort 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 Washington's Cold War message in fluent Spanish to the mostly anti-American Mexican Foreign Ministry; later on, interested in reducing tensions and changing the focus from the Cold War 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 a "reform-minded, Harvard-trained president," Carlos Salinas de Gortari, was seen as an opportunity for Mexico to leave behind its nationalist inward outlook and embrace globalization, which led President George H. W. Bush to nominate Ambassador John D. Negroponte, a savvy career diplomat who could help bring the negotiations of the landmark North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to conclusion. Anticipating an uphill battle with a protectionist Congress to ratify NAFTA, President William J. Clinton turned to James R. Jones, a politician and consensus builder with close ties 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 quietly observed the historic end of the PRI's monopoly 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. At the outset of a multibillion dollar counternarcotics aid package to Mexico, President Barack Obama accepted his Secretary of State's suggestion to nominate Carlos Pascual, a Cuban-born 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. After the unexpected resignation of Pascual, who President Felipe Calderón declared *persona non grata*, Obama replaced him with Earl Anthony Wayne, a career ambassador with proven qualifications in security and economic issues, whose discretion and diplomatic touch would help mend fences with Calderón. Toward the end of his second term, Obama, a strong advocate of gender equality, made history by naming the first-ever woman ambassador to Mexico, Roberta S. Jacobson, a public servant known for her Mexican expertise and outstanding diplomatic background, who

witnessed the disarray in the bilateral relationship during the first phase of the Trump presidency. Finally, Donald J. Trump nominated Christopher Landau, a high-powered attorney with no previous diplomatic experience but well connected to Washington's legal elite with a good instinct on how not to let his mercurial boss interfere with his positive personal vibes for Mexico.

From World War II until 1990, U.S. foreign policy was framed as an East-West conflict. Everything was viewed through that Cold War 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 sphere of influence. A stable and anti-communist Mexico was the paramount U.S. geopolitical goal. During the 71 years of the PRI's reign, there had been a tacit agreement to ignore government corruption, human rights violations, and vote fraud. A stable Mexico on the southern border was more important than a fully democratic Mexico. U.S.-Mexico relations have evolved and grown more mature since those days. While concern to preserve internal stability remains strong, the end of the proxy wars in Central America shifted the policy focus and broadened the role of ambassadors.

As Mexico became more open adopting free-market economic reforms and became more democratic with less centralized political power, U.S. ambassadors widened their reach in Mexican society. 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 Mexican actors to broaden political participation, open up the political system, and warned governments against the use of force to suppress dissent.

Over the past several decades, the relationship has been largely defined by diplomacy, economic interests, interagency communication, and collaboration. From the Mérida Initiative that rhetorically recognized a shared responsibility to tackle security problems and negotiation of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), to joint efforts to contain the flow of undocumented migrants, cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments has advanced. While periodic tensions over old and new issues such as the war on drugs, the energy sector, foreign investment, illegal arms trafficking, human rights, and corruption have occurred, in many ways, U.S.-Mexico rela-



tions became more pragmatic and predictable. After four tumultuous years during the Trump Administration, which used threats of tariffs and border closures to force Mexico to cooperate, the Biden Administration returned to the traditional approach of stressing common ground and playing down differences.

But some habits die hard. Anti-Americanism remains high among fervent supporters of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. It is not unusual to see his followers take a strong anti-U.S. stand in major international crises such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Outside observers may find Mexicans' embrace of the false Russian narrative mind-boggling. After all, the United States is Mexico's closest neighbor, number one trade partner, and home to millions of Mexican citizens. More often than not, Mexican presidents publicly criticize the United States and its policies for political expediency while at the same time quietly pursuing a close relationship.

American envoys tend to be by definition controversial and mistrusted figures. They are the closest and most direct target at which to vent two centuries of accumulated frustration. Their mere presence can exacerbate anti-American sentiments and nourish popular conspiratorial theories of real or perceived acts of intervention. Over the past decades, their arrival in Mexico, with notable exceptions, has been preceded by a public drama or "baptism by fire," as a former ambassador politely called the barrage of media attacks new ambassadors can be subjected to. Paradoxically, all have been granted agrément, and most have been awarded the Order of the *Águila Azteca*, Mexico's highest decoration given to a foreigner, on conclusion of their tenures. 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.

My extensive reporting on U.S.-Mexico relations over three decades—from the NAFTA negotiations and drug wars to the immigration crisis, 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. I was curious to hear their side of a story I often find enigmatic. The event that prompted me to start the project was the political storm caused by the Wikileaks release of confidential U.S. embassy cables, which resulted in the American ambassador's abrupt resignation in 2011. It was a reminder of how volatile the role of the U.S. ambassador to Mexico can be.

## THIS VOLUME

This volume is the second English edition of *U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico, The Relationship Through Their Eyes* (Woodrow Wilson Center 2012). It incorporates three additional exclusive one-on-one interviews—with Ambassadors Wayne, Jacobson, and Landau; an updated introduction; and a new title: *Mexico, a Challenging Assignment: U.S. Ambassadors Share Their Experiences*. With these additional new interviews, I complete a ten-year project of interviewing all living U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico: Patrick J. Lucey (1977-1979), Julian Nava (1980-1981), John A. Gavin (1981-1986), John D. Negroponete (1989-1993), James R. Jones (1993-1997), Jeffrey Davidow (1998-2002), Antonio O. Garza (2002-2009), Carlos Pascual (2009-2011), Earl Anthony Wayne (2011-2015), Roberta S. Jacobson (2016-2018), and Christopher Landau (2019-2021). Although Charles J. Pilliod (1986-1989) is the only ambassador I was not able to meet in person due to health problems, the chapter under his name highlights his term. Ambassador Pilliod passed away in 2016. Patrick J. Lucey and John A. Gavin have also died, in 2014 and 2018 respectively; but their words to me, the last journalist who spoke to them, endure in the pages of this book.

The interviews constitute the centerpiece of this volume. It is therefore not an academic text. 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 45 years of U.S.-Mexico relations from the unique perspective of these key actors who helped shape and influence the relationship. It is a forum to hear their voices and see Mexico through their eyes. More than 30 hours of questions and answers offer insightful, colorful, and hard-to-come-by insider accounts of some key events that shaped U.S.-Mexican relations during three Democratic and four Republican administrations.

Their testimony shows that the influence ambassadors exerted in Washington's decision-making process and the political latitude they had were often determined by their personal relationship with the U.S. president, the U.S. president's particular interest in Mexico, the political context of the time, and the ambassadors' own character and political weight. These accounts suggest that the White House pays more attention to Mexico in times of crisis (Zapatista revolt, political assassinations, 1994 peso crisis, rise of powerful drug cartels, and border immigration crisis) and of opportunity (discovery of huge oil reserves, NAFTA, and USCMA). And the interviews confirm that Mexico is not an easy place to be U.S. ambassador. In fact, almost all of them agreed that it was one of, if not the most, challenging assignment of their public careers.



I conducted the interviews during different time periods and in different places over the past decade. From 2011 through 2012, I met with Lucey, Nava, Gavin, and Davidow in Milwaukee, La Jolla, and Los Angeles; with Negroponte, Jones, and Pascual in Washington, D.C.; and with Garza in Mexico City. I interviewed Wayne and Jacobson in 2018 in Washington, D.C. Both texts first appeared in *Así Nos Ven*, the second Spanish commercial edition published by Planeta in 2019. Finally, I interviewed Landau in 2021 in Washington, D.C.

With each ambassador, I addressed specific issues, events, and actors that marked their term. Some spoke more candidly, less circumspectly, and with better recollection of the past than others. Each interview represents a chapter, which includes a brief biography, key events that took place during their watch, and an introduction explaining the political context in which they served. U.S. diplomatic dispatches obtained through the FOIA are referenced in the footnotes. The volume also contains a chronological list of all U.S. envoys to Mexico from 1822 to the present.







**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 *Águila 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 re-entry 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 percent over the previous 8 months. The same month, López Portillo visited Washington for talks on energy and immigration.



## Patrick J. Lucey

1977-1979

**P**ATRICK 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

---

1 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 an FOIA request by the author. U.S. Interests and Key Issues, p. 1.

2 President of Mexico, December 1, 1976- November 30 1982; died in 2004.

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 destabilize 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 Adminis-

---

3 Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-41, *Ibid.*

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

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

tration 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 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.<sup>10</sup>

---

6 José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos* (Fernández editores 1988).

7 *Ibid.* p 811.

8 *Ibid.* p. 689.

9 *Ibid.* p. 815.

10 Ambassador Lucey passed away in May, 2014.



*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>11</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 become 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?*

---

<sup>11</sup> Carter's Chief of Staff, 1977 to 1980; died in 2008.

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>12</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 that definition pretty well.<sup>13</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

---

12 Foreign Minister, 1976 to 1978; died in 2001.

13 Lucey is a Roman Catholic, of Irish descent.

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>14</sup> and Warren Christopher.<sup>15</sup>

*How often did you meet with López Portillo?*

I saw him whenever I wanted to, usually at Los Pinos. Italia<sup>16</sup> was his translator. She was a little girl, and she would sit between us, and he would speak, of course, in Spanish, and I in English,<sup>17</sup> and she would do instant translation and in no time at all you felt like that 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.”

---

14 Carter’s Secretary of State, 1977 to 1980; died in 2002.

15 Carter’s Deputy Secretary of State, 1977 to 1981; died in 2011.

16 Italia Morayta.

17 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, page B6.



*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>18</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>19</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?*

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.

---

18 José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos* (Fernández editores 1988) p. 689.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 815.

*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>20</sup> helped draft the new version.<sup>21</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?*

Well, for instance, we talked about the Mexican War. In the Mexican schoolbooks, it's not called the Mexican War; it's called the "unfair war." There were cadets in Chapulte-

---

20 *The New York Times* correspondent in Mexico, author of *Distant Neighbors* (Vintage, 1984).

21 José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos*, (Fernández editores 1988) p. 814.

pec 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>22</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>23</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>24</sup> He said, "Gosh, our relationship with China is so sensitive right

---

22 January 21, 1978, Vice President Mondale traveled to Mexico for meetings with López Portillo.

23 López Portillo traveled to China, Japan and the Philippines in October 1978.

24 Carter's National Security Advisor, 1977-1981.

now that the last thing we need is to have the Mexicans get involved 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 debriefing 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>25</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

---

25 José López Portillo, *Mis Tiempos* (Fernández editores 1988) p. 685.

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.

### *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>26</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.

---

<sup>26</sup> U.S.-Mexico diplomatic agreements for the importation of temporary contract workers from Mexico to the United States, 1942-1967.

*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.

*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 faraway?*

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>27</sup>*

I remember Bob Pastor.

---

27 Latin America Advisor at the NSC, 1977-1981.

*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.

*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>28</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>29</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?*

---

28 Foreign Minister of Mexico, 1979-1982; died in 1997.

29 Jorge G. Castañeda, Foreign Minister of Mexico, 2001-2003.



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. 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** 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.



## Julian Nava

1980-1981

**J**ULIAN NAVA was the first Mexican-American to become ambassador to Mexico. In naming Nava, a son of poor Mexican migrants and civil rights activists 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

---

1 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.

2 See interview with Ambassador Patrick J. Lucey.

3 1976-1982; died in 2004.

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 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 claims 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.



*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.

---

4 Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors* (Vintage 1986), p. 471.

5 He earned a doctorate from Harvard University.

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.

#### *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.

---

6 Los Angeles School Board.



President José López Portillo and Julian Nava during the presentation of credentials at Los Pinos. *Nava's personal archives.*

*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 misinterpreted as not liking me because I was

---

7 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.



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 Castañeda 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

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

9 Jorge Castañeda y Álvarez de la Rosa, Foreign Minister of Mexico, 1976-1978; died in 2001.

10 Deputy Chief of Mission.

11 Alan Riding, *Ibid.*

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

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 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?*

---

13 Patrick J. Lucey, Ambassador to Mexico, 1977-1979; died 2014.

14 Agustín Legorreta Chauvet, Chairman of Banamex, 1971-1982.

15 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. A6.

16 Director of Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex), 1976-1981; died in 2011.

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 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 led 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?*

---

17 Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, 1977-1981; died 2017.

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.

*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 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

---

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

19 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.



Julian Nava and President Jimmy Carter at the White House. *White House Photo Archives.*

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 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

20 A left-wing party that ran Henry Wallace for president in 1948.

21 President-elect Reagan and López Portillo met for the first time in Ciudad Juárez Jan 5, 1981. According to Riding, Nava had suggested publicly 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.

22 Secretary of State, 1981-1982; died in 2010.

23 U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, 1981-1986; died 2018.

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.

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

24 See Ambassador Gavin's interview for his version of his nomination.

25 Roberto de la Madrid, Governor of Baja California, 1977-1983. Died in 2010.

26 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.



No. That did not come up. One experience I had was that the Colombian M-19, a terrorist group, they were 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 close 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

---

27 Chief of Police in Mexico City, 1976-1982; died in 2000.

28 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.

29 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.

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.

*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.





**JOHNA. 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 commandment of the Fifteenth Naval District (Latin America). In the 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 Gamma Holding, an international venture capital firm, and lives in Beverly Hills, California.<sup>1</sup>

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 re-elected; Camarena was abducted and murdered in Guadalajara; and Mexico City was shaken by a massive earthquake.

---

1 Ambassador Gavin passed away in February, 2018.



## 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>2</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

---

<sup>2</sup> Alan Riding, "Mexico Dismayed that Actor might be U.S. Envoy," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1981.

Administration, José López Portillo<sup>3</sup> welcomed Gavin and ordered all Bacardi ads featuring the soon-to-be diplomat removed from Mexican television.<sup>4</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>5</sup> Bilateral differences around Central America, drug trafficking, and corruption intensified with the inauguration of President Miguel de la Madrid in 1982.<sup>6</sup> Reagan ordered the State Department to pressure Mexico into supporting U.S. policies in Central America.<sup>7</sup> Ambassador Gavin was asked to draw up a list of Mexican cabinet officials likely to cooperate with Washington.<sup>8</sup> Gavin's outspoken demeanor clashed with the new administration, most noticeably with Secretary of Foreign Affairs Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor.<sup>9</sup> In his memoirs,<sup>10</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>11</sup> Years after leaving office, Sepúlveda said that "Gavin is probably the

---

3 President of Mexico, 1976-1982; died in 2004.

4 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.

5 *Ibid.* p. 1173-1174.

6 President of Mexico, 1982-1988; died in 2012.

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

8 James W. Wilkie in "Imágenes Recíprocas, la educación en las relaciones México y Estados Unidos," (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Azcapotzalco, 1991); p. 40-41.

9 Member of Mexico's Foreign Service, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 1982-1988.

10 Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 398-399; died 2012.

11 *Ibid.* p. 421.

U.S. ambassador that has caused the most damage to U.S.-Mexico relations since Joel Poinsett and Henry Lane Wilson.”<sup>12</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>13</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>14</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 (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena in 1985.<sup>15</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.

---

12 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.

13 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.

14 Robert A. Pastor and Jorge Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship, the United States and Mexico*, (Vintage Books, 1989) p. 81.

15 Camarena and his Mexican pilot, Adolfo Zavala Avelar, were abducted February 7 1985 in Guadalajara.

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>16</sup> Gavin took the lead in venting American frustration. He publicly 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 three 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."



### *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 American Accord, which later became the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Apparently, this speech got

---

<sup>16</sup> Camarena's tortured body was found a month after he disappeared on a ranch 70 miles southeast of Guadalajara.



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 honor’s 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.



John A. Gavin and José López Portillo at the ambassador's residence. *Gavin's personal archives.*

### *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>17</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

---

<sup>17</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, Harper Collins, 2007.

Ted Briggs,<sup>18</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 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>19</sup> and then Shultz?<sup>20</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.

---

18 Everett ("Ted") Briggs, Country Director of Mexican Affairs, 1974-1981.

19 Secretary of State, 1981-1992; died in 2010.

20 Secretary of State, 1982-1989; died in 2021.

*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. 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>21</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>22</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.

*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 Gutiérrez 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

---

21 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.

22 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 Camarena. Died in a federal prison in Florida in 2012.



pretty much of a mensch, as they say. For example, who really gave the order to turn off the computers when Cárdenas<sup>23</sup> 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>24</sup> There was an editorial in *The New York Times*<sup>25</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?*

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.

---

23 Cuahtémoc Cárdenas ran for president of Mexico three times. His 1988 loss to the PRI's candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari, has long been considered a direct result of broad electoral fraud, later acknowledged by de la Madrid.

24 Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 2004), p. 815-817.

25 Editorial, "About that Close Election...", *The New York Times*, March 15, 2004.

*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 él solo*—that it was our problem; the demand was in the U.S. 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, "Narcotrafickers 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 López Portillo?*

I got along with him splendidly.

*Why did he threaten to sue you?<sup>26</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), 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>27</sup> At one point Helms said, "Now, this fellow, López Portila [sic], is one of the richest men in the world, isn't he?"

---

26 UPI wire, "Gavin is a Slanderer, López Portillo Asserts," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1986.

27 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.

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 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.** 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 Águila 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 Mazatlán; 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.



## 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 framework of understanding 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 impossi-

---

1 President of Mexico, 1982-1988; died in 2012.

ble 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 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 to be key in trying to influence 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:

- 
- 2 Pilliod was known to be a friend of Romulo O'Farrell, the then influential owner of the television conglomerate Televisa and the newspaper *Novedades*.
  - 3 William Stockton, "Mexico Glad as new U.S. envoy accents positive," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1986.
  - 4 Miguel de la Madrid, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 615.
  - 5 Gossiper.
  - 6 *Ibid.*



“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 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-determi-

---

7 Briefing memorandum, “Checklist for our meeting with U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Charles Pilliod on Monday February 6, at 2:00 PM.” 2 pages, January, 29, 1988, unclassified by the Department of State on June 18, 1997.

8 *Ibid.*

9 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.

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

nation... 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 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

---

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 "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.

14 Colosio became Salinas' first handpicked successor, but he was assassinated in 1994 and replaced by Ernesto Zedillo.

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.<sup>18</sup>

---

15 “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.

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

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

18 Ambassador Pilliod died in 2016, three years later.



**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. 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.



## John D. Negroponte

1989-1993

**J**OHAN 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 "*punte 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

---

1 President of Mexico, 1988-1994.

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 down-playing 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 stability 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 Salinas "ending corruption" as one of his 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 to this day 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

---

2 Founder of the PRD and 1988 presidential candidate.

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

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

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

the most part a history of bitterness and mistrust. While Negroponete 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 on the NAFTA negotiations and the relationship with the United States that was not previously approved by Córdoba. Aware of Córdoba's role, Negroponete became closer to him than to Salinas and consulted more with him than with the president. Negroponete barely dealt with the Foreign Minister whose role was largely diminished.

Negroponete 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 – of 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.



### *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

---

6 President Salinas's Chief of Staff, 1988-1994.

7 National Security Advisor, 1987-1989; died in 2021.

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 Castañeda 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 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

---

8 Secretary of State, 1989-1992.

9 Secretary of State, 1982-1989; died in 2021.

10 Foreign Minister, 1979-1982.

11 National Security Advisor, 1969-1975.



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. These are real market econo-

---

<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.

mists. 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, 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

---

13 Secretary of the Treasury, 1988-1994.

14 Secretary of Commerce and Industrial Development, 1988-1994.

15 Franklin D. Roosevelt's Ambassador to Mexico, 1933-1941.

16 Under Secretary for Economic and Agriculture Affairs, 1991-1992.

17 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.

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.

*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. Foreign Minister 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.

---

18 Secretary of Commerce, 1989-1992; died in 2010.

19 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.

20 National Security Advisor, 1989-1993; died in 2020.



John D. Negroponte and President George H.W. Bush in a meeting at the White House. *White House Photo Archives.*

*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 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.

*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

---

<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.

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. 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.

---

22 Richard Thornburgh, U.S. Attorney General, 1989; died in 2020.

23 Mexico's Attorney General, 1988-1991; died in 2006.

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

25 During a 35-minute press conference after the meeting, Quayle said that Salinas "expressed" to him his "strong displeasure" over Alvarez'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.

---

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

*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 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

---

<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.





John D. NegroponTE and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in a meeting at Los Pinos. *NegroponTE's personal archives.*

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.

*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 peacemaker. These were still firmly

---

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

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 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,

---

29 Tim Golden, "3 Latin Leader press Castro for faster change," *The New York Times*, October 24, 1991.

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?*

---

30 U.S. Trade Representative, 1989-1993.

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

32 *Ibid.* p. 81-83.

33 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>*

---

34 Sergio González Galvez, deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

35 José Antonio González Fernández, PGR attaché in Washington, D.C.

36 Robert Pastorino, Deputy Chief of Mission under Negroponste; died in 2013.

37 A confidential U.S. Embassy cable to Washington signed by Negroponste, 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 (Negroponste) 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 very systematic. 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,

---

38 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.

and of course, the Zapatistas. A year after I left things were not in as good shape as they had seemed when I left.

*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?*


---

39 Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 2002-2003; leading scholar, politician and opinion maker; died in 2005.

40 Aguilar Zinser successfully led 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.

41 Jorge G. Castañeda, Secretary of Foreign Relations, 2001-2003.

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.







**JAMES ROBERT JONES** was born May 5, 1939 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He was elected to the House of Representatives for Oklahoma's 1st 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 Águila 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 was 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.



## James Robert Jones

1993-1997

**J**AMES 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 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

---

1 President of Mexico, 1988-1994.

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 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<sup>7</sup>

---

2 President of Mexico, 1994-2000.

3 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.

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

5 Treasury Secretary, 1995-1999.

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

7 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 in 1999 and acquitted upon appeal in 2005.

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 Manatt 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>



*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 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 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?*

---

8 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.

9 Lyndon B. Johnson visited Mexico City April 14-15, 1966 and met with Mexican President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz.

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.

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

---

10 Ambassador to Mexico, 1989-1993.



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 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 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

---

11 Mexico's Attorney General's Office.



Ambassador Jones with President Ernesto Zedillo. *Jones' personal archives.*

forget what name we called it.<sup>12</sup> We came up with a *Kissingeresque* kind of title to it, but we then encouraged all kinds of observers to come in and view the 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?*

---

12 "Foreign visitors."

13 Founder of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

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 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 to 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?*

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.”

---

14 Foreign Secretary, 1993-1994; died in 2015.

15 Chief of Staff of the Office of the Presidency, 1994-1997.

*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 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?*

---

16 Secretary of State, 1993-1997; died in 2011.

17 Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, 1993-1997.

18 Attorney General, 1993-2001; died in 2016.

19 Secretary of Commerce, 1993-1996; died in 1996.

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

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?*

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.*

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.

---

21 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 Jan. 17, 1997, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

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.

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

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

23 President of Mexico, 1970-1976.

24 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* (University Press Kansas, 2008), by Jefferson Morley.

25 President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, 1964-1970; died in 1979.

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 resolu-

---

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

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

28 Secretary of Finance and Public Credit, 1988-1994.

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

tion 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 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?*

---

30 Larry Summers, Deputy Secretary of Treasury, 1995-1999.

31 Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Monetary and Financial Policy, Treasury Department, 1995-1996.

32 Treasury Department, Senior Official.

33 Clinton's Senior Advisor on Policy and Strategy, 1993-1996.

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

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. 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.

---

35 Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1995-1999.

36 Richard Gephardt, Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, 1995-2003.

37 Vice President, 1993-2001.

38 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.

*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, then basically through Hillary they nominated Bill Weld. When I saw that he was taking on Jesse 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?*

---

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

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

41 Ambassador to Mexico, 1998-2002.

42 Ambassador to Mexico, 2009-2011.

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.





**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 Águila 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.





## 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 of service as America's highest ranking diplomat.<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

- 
- 1 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.
  - 2 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.
  - 3 He is one of only three people to hold the personal rank of Career Ambassador.

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 relation 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 counternarcotics 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.

---

4 President of Mexico, 1994-2000.

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 Mexican-U.S. relationship. Davidow offers a rare look into the behind-the-scenes dealings of a highly secretive and often contentious relation. 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.



#### *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?*

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

6 Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, who blocked Weld's confirmation; died 2008.

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 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.

---

7 Secretary of State, 1997-2001; died 2022.

8 National Security Advisor, 1997-2001; died 2015.

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 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 preWikileaks—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?*

---

9 Thomas Constantine, DEA Administrator, 1994-1999; died 2015.

10 Enrique Camarena, DEA agent killed in Guadalajara in 1985.

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 Liébano 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.

*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

---

11 President Zedillo's Chief of Staff.

12 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.



Ambassador Davidow and Presidents Bush and Fox at the White House. *Davidow's personal archives.*

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

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



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 countryside. 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

---

14 Francisco Labastida, PRI's presidential candidate in 1994.

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* 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 government, 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

---

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

16 Ricardo Monreal, PRI governor of Zacatecas, 1998-2004.

17 Attorney General, 1993-2001; died 2016.

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.*

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

---

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

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

20 Mayor of Tijuana, 2004-2007.

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 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

---

21 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.

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 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,

---

22 U.S. Attorney General, 2001-2005.

23 U.S. Secretary of State, 2001-2005; died 2021.

24 Mexican Foreign Minister, 2000-2003.

“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 him. 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 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?

---

25 Castañeda’s half-brother and member of Mexico’s Foreign Service.

*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 peace-keeping. 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.?*

---

26 A state law to criminalize illegal immigration.



I think so, but it's often difficult in Mexican politics, because a certain level of *anti-gringoismo* 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.** 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 multi-million-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 US-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.



## 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>

---

<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.

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 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 billionaire, 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

---

2 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, "The U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo will be closed," Press Release 05, July 29, 2005.

3 James C. McKinley, Jr., Bush's Ambassador to Mexico Is sometimes Undiplomatic, *The New York Times*, August 20, 2005, p. A4.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Carta del Embajador Antonio O. Garza, *El Universal*, Jan 26, 2005.

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>

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

---

6 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.

7 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, "Scene setter for the Visit to Mexico of FBI deputy Director John S. Pistole, May 21-23, 2008," Classification: Secret; Date: 2008-06-16, as reprinted by *El Pais.com internacional*, March 25, 2011.

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 1980's.

*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 incoming 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 1980's. 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



Antonio O. Garza and Vicente Fox. Garza's personal archives.

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 relations with 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, Leslie 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?*

---

8 Director of the Office of Mexican Affairs until December 2002 and then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, Department of State.

9 Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, 2001-2005.

10 National Security Advisor, 2001-2005.

11 Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2003-2005.

12 Secretary of State, 2005-2009.

13 John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State, 2007-2009.

14 Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council, 2005-2009.

15 Ambassador John S. Dickson, Deputy Chief of Mission.

16 Deputy Chief of Mission.

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.

*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

---

17 Francisco Gil Diaz, Secretary of the Treasury, 2000-2006.

18 Secretary of Health, 2000-2006.

19 Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2000-2003.

20 General Clemente Vega García, Secretary of National Defense, 2000-2006.

21 Secretary of Gobernación.

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 friend and I enjoy seeing him and I think he is insightful. He's provocative 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.

---

22 Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 2002-2003; died in 2005.

23 Under Secretary for North American Affairs, 2003-2006.



Ambassador Garza, Presidents Calderón and Bush, and Condoleezza Rice in a working meeting. *Garza's personal archives.*

*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, 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.

---

24 2006 PRD presidential candidate, known as AMLO, his initials.

25 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.

26 Hugo Chávez, the staunchly anti-American president of Venezuela; died 2013.

27 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.



*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, and there was a lot of *grilla* 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 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 ‘90’s; 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.

28 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.

29 María Asunción Aramburuzabala.

30 Calderón was director of the Mexican development bank Banco de Obras y Servicios Públicos (Banobras) in 2003.

31 Calderón was Secretary of Energy from 2003 to 2004.

32 PRI 2006 presidential candidate.

*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?*

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<sup>33</sup> 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?*

---

33 Carlos Pascual, President Obama's first ambassador to Mexico, was forced to resign in 2011 due to tensions with Calderón.

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** 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 and as a 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.



## 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-adverse" 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, 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 Office of Special Envoy and is the Coordinator of 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 personal attacks and his decision to resign and move forward. He declined to talk about

---

1 Mary Beth Sheridan, “Calderón cites ‘serious damage’ to U.S. ties,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2011, p A9.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Ambassador Carlos Pascual.” Department of State, Press Statement, March 19, 2011.



Wikileaks and denied that U.S. diplomacy has a double message. Pascual left Mexico without speaking again with Calderón.



*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 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' Summit.<sup>4</sup> 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 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 in everyone's mind that if one could not work with Mexico, 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?*

---

4 Presidents Obama and Calderón, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

5 National Security Advisor, 2009 -2010.

6 Deputy Secretary of State, 2009-2011.

7 Director of the National Economic Council, 2009-2010.

8 Director of the Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, 2009-2011.

9 Secretary of Homeland Security, 2009-2013.

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 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?*

---

10 Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 2009-2012.

11 Refers to the four pillars of the Mérida Initiative: disrupt organized crime operations; strengthen the rule of law; create a 21<sup>st</sup> century border structure and build strong and resilient communities.

12 A sting operation run by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) condemned by Mexico. It allowed guns walk into Mexico between 2006 and 2010.

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 the ground and the policy discussions in

---

13 Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, 2009-2013.

14 Director of the Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council, 2009-2012.

15 Assistant Secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs, 2009-2011.

16 Deputy Assistant Secretary for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, 2007-2010, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs, 2010-2011.

17 Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2007-2011.



Carlos Pascual and President Barack Obama at the door of Air Force One. *White House Photo Archives.*

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 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 are 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 a 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 go, 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 influences 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 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 principal 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 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

---

18 Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen Stedman, *Power & Responsibility Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats*, Brookings Institute Press 2009.

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 to try 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 statement 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.

*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.

19 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Ambassador Carlos Pascual," Department of State, Press Statement, March 19, 2011

20 Carlos Pascual, "Wikileaks en contexto," *El Universal*, December 3, 2010.

*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 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.

---

<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.

*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 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.

---

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Earl Wayne assumed office as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in August 2011 and presented his credentials to Calderón in September.





**EARL ANTHONY “TONY” WAYNE** was born in Sacramento, California, on August 5, 1950. He earned his Bachelor of Arts from the University of California at Berkeley, his Master of Arts from Stanford University, his Master of Arts from Princeton University and his MPA from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. A career diplomat since 1975, he was posted overseas in Morocco; France; Belgium; Argentina, where he served as ambassador; Afghanistan; and, finally, Mexico. He took a leave of absence and worked as the National Security Correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* in the late 1980s. Over the following decades, Wayne served in the State Department’s Counterterrorism office and as Director for Western Europe at the National Security Council, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Mission to the European Union, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe and Canada, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe. He became the longest-serving Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs. Wayne was Director of Economics and Development and then Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. He was confirmed as a “Career Ambassador,” the most senior diplomatic rank in the U.S. Foreign Service, in 2010. Ambassador Wayne retired from the Foreign Service on his return from Mexico in 2015. He was awarded the Order of the Águila Azteca, Mexico’s highest decoration given to a foreigner. He is currently a Public Policy Fellow and co-chair of the Mexico Institute’s advisory board at the Woodrow Wilson Center and a Distinguished Diplomat in Residence and Professor at American University’s School of International Service.

During Wayne’s three years and 11 months as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, U.S. President Barack Obama was reelected and visited Mexico City, Los Cabos, and Toluca; the PRI regained the presidency; Sinaloa Cartel kingpin El Chapo Guzmán escaped from prison; drug lord Rafael Caro Quintero was freed; a major corruption scandal plummeted President Peña Nieto’s popularity; 43 students in Ayotzinapa went missing and were believed killed; and CIA agents were attacked by Mexican Federal Police.





## Earl Anthony “Tony” Wayne

2011–2015

EARL ANTHONY “TONY” WAYNE became U.S. ambassador to Mexico on September 6, 2011, six months after his predecessor was forced to resign. The countries were going through different political moments. In the United States, President Barack Obama had announced his intention to seek reelection; in Mexico, the six-year term of President Calderón was coming to an end. The surprising resignation of Ambassador Carlos Pascual, after a public dispute with Calderón over secret embassy cables criticizing the Mexican military that had been leaked by Wikileaks, was a blow to the Mérida Initiative, the \$2.3 billion package of U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance to Mexico. Unwilling to leave the embassy leaderless for too long, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wasted no time in looking for a new ambassador, preferably a career Foreign Service person to facilitate Senate confirmation, with experience in the implementation of foreign aid programs.

At the time, Wayne was serving as Deputy Ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. He had been charged with coordinating multibillion-dollar nonmilitary U.S. government programs to Afghanistan. Clinton believed that this experience, work on

economic diplomacy and general knowledge of Spanish, ideally qualified him for the demanding Mexican assignment. Though Wayne did not know Mexico, and Mexico did not know him, he arrived with impeccable diplomatic credentials.

But his connections to Afghanistan, where the U.S. was militarily engaged in fighting Osama bin Laden, did not initially go over well in Mexico. The “messenger is the message,” critics decried. The Obama Administration rejected the notion that the security challenges in Mexico were comparable with those in Afghanistan. Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow came out in Wayne’s defense. High-ranking diplomats are generally not sent to war theaters, Davidow explained; therefore, it was a “real act of patriotism” for Wayne to have accepted the dangerous assignment in Afghanistan. He called the decision to send him to Mexico “excellent.”<sup>1</sup>

When Wayne arrived in Mexico City relations were tense. Media reports about the United States expanding its role in Mexico’s war on drugs by sending intelligence and military personnel, the creation of a joint “espionage center” in Mexico City,<sup>2</sup> a failed secret operation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives that allowed illegal guns be smuggled into Mexico, and the public dispute around Pascual, had generated tensions that Obama’s second ambassador had to deal with on day one.

Wayne kept a low profile. He avoided controversy. He was discreet and professional. His rare public statements focused on highlighting the positive side of the relationship. He kept away from talking about controversial domestic issues. He promoted soft-power initiatives such as clean energies, empowerment of women, English teaching, student exchange programs, bike riding and music. He even helped connect the rock bands Kiss and Linkin Park, as well as Lady Gaga, with Mexican youth groups interested in the environment and in fighting bullying and drug addiction.

But behind closed doors, Wayne did not shy from addressing tough issues such as corruption, human rights violations and impunity. After an armed ambush by Federal Police of two alleged CIA agents on a Mexican road, the most sensitive crisis he faced, Wayne asked for an urgent meeting with President Calderón to ask for a full investigation. Wayne also dealt with the bilateral crisis over El Chapo Guzmán’s escape from a high-security Mexican prison in 2015. An embarrassed President Peña Nieto was left no option but to accept U.S. assistance to recapture the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel.

---

1 Dolia Estévez, “Los Retos de Wayne,” *Poder y Negocios*, September 2011.

2 Ginger Thompson, “U.S. Widens Role in Battle against Mexican Drug Cartels,” *The New York Times*, August 6 2011.

Wayne observed, from the diplomatic sidelines, the 2012 presidential elections that brought the PRI back to the presidency. He met in private with the main actors, including Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current Mexican president. He was careful not to give the impression of interference. Based on most polls, the embassy was confident the PRI would win.

I interviewed Ambassador Wayne on October 11, 2018, in his office at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. For almost two hours, he spoke about the challenges and gratifications of his Mexican assignment, and of what he believes to be his legacy.



#### *How did you find out about your nomination?*

In early 2011, when I was deputy ambassador in Afghanistan, I was called to come back to Washington. I was told that the chief of staff and the secretary of state<sup>3</sup> wanted to talk to me. I went in and said hello to her chief of staff and she said somebody'd like to talk to me. The secretary of state came in and said, "Hi Tony, how are you doing? How would you like to serve as ambassador to Mexico?"

#### *Were you caught by surprise?*

It was a surprise to me. I knew they had been looking for some place that they might offer me, but I didn't know about Mexico. "Mexico? That's a really big place, a big relationship," I said. "Yeah, but you've been helping to manage this massive effort that we have in Afghanistan and you speak Spanish," Secretary Clinton replied. So, I said, "Thank you very much, let me make sure I have a chance talk to my wife about this." I went home and thought about it with my wife. The next day I called back to the secretary's chief of staff, and said I would be happy to serve.

#### *Did you have a particular place you wanted to be assigned to?*

I wouldn't say I had a particular place I wanted to go. The year before, before I was asked to stay another year in Afghanistan, it had looked like I might be nominated ambas-

---

3 Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, 2009-2013.

sador to Colombia, but then they asked me to stay for a second year, I wasn't sure what would be open or where I would go. Mexico was not on the list of countries that we knew were going to be open because this was a special request.

*Did you give it much thought?*

I saw it as a massive relationship and thus a very complex job with many different actors on both sides of the border that needed to be addressed, but also an honor. At that time, the President of Mexico wanted to have a new ambassador.

*How was your Senate confirmation?*

It was a very quick process. I went back and finished in Afghanistan, left at the beginning of June. Came back to Washington. Did not have any vacation. I had to start learning about Mexico and practicing my Spanish which I hadn't really spoken for two years. After intensive study and preparation, I had my confirmation hearing in the summer and went down to Mexico in order to be there for the *Grito*, Mexico's Independence Day celebration.

*How much did you know about Mexico?*

I hadn't served in Mexico. I had worked and participated in our economic discussions with Mexico in the early 2000, when I was assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs. I remember meeting Agustín Carstens<sup>4</sup> and I knew Angel Gurría<sup>5</sup> and others from those U.S.-Mexico economic dialogues. But I had not worked on U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations, rather I had been working more on specific economic issues.

*Did your work in Afghanistan help you deal with the security problems in Mexico?*

Secretary Clinton saw I had worked well with other governments. As assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs for six years, I worked all around the world managing relationships. In Afghanistan, anything that wasn't military, we tried at the Embassy to organize, and then we tried to coordinate better with the military for its non-military aid programs as well as with other donors. I'd also been working on rule-of-law programs, justice programs, which were quite big in Afghanistan at that time. At that

---

4 Governor of the Central Bank of Mexico, 2010-2017.

5 Secretary of the Treasury, 1998-2000.

time an American program<sup>6</sup> was under way for Mexico but had not yet delivered much assistance at all.

*Did press comments about the “messenger being the message” surprise you?*

I did not expect this type of coverage, but I did see the articles. I was trying to explain that I have all this other experience and that I happen to have been in Afghanistan from 2009 through early 2011 because it was a major priority for the U.S. government and the U.S. government tried to send some of its most experienced diplomats to help. I was Deputy Ambassador in Afghanistan. This was a time when the U.S. had five ambassador-ranked people serving in Kabul. I knew that we had this big program in Mexico we were trying to make sure it got under way in an effective way, the Mérida Initiative. I saw it as an opportunity to help.

*How did you prepare for Mexico?*

It was very intense. I got piles of papers from the Mexico desk at the State Department, but I only had two weeks basically to read them and to ask questions. Then I had my hearing, it went very well. I got a few weeks to practice Spanish again at the Foreign Service Institute. It was a little hard, because in Afghanistan you either spoke English or the chief of staff of the president spoke French. Anyway, it started to come back to me!

*Did you have the opportunity to read Mexican literature, Octavio Paz for example, and get to know more about the culture?*

I tried, but when you have a total of two and a half months to prepare, there’s a lot to absorb. I tried to talk to a lot of people, and happily there were several seminars that people organized and invited many experts to come and talk to me about Mexico and Mexican culture and history. I did try to read Mexican history, but I didn’t get to read Octavio Paz.

*And now?*

Well, let’s say I’ve read excerpts in Spanish and longer snippets in English. It’s still easier for me to read English.

*Did you meet President Obama before going to Mexico?*

---

6 The Mérida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexico security cooperation agreement launched by the Bush and Calderón Administrations in 2007.

I did. I met him before I went to Mexico, and we had a nice discussion in the Oval Office. We talked about him wanting to help President Calderón and President Obama said that that was important to him. We had a nice chat.

*Did he tell you which were his priorities in Mexico?*

He did. He talked about one of the most obvious things he wanted to get our security cooperation agreed and going forward in a good way to tackle the serious security challenges. And at the same time, he made clear that he wanted to strengthen the economic ties and manage all the many different things he knew came up in U.S.-Mexico ties even though he didn't get to pay attention to in this complex relationship.

*Was President Obama concerned with the narrative that Mexico was becoming a failed state?*

No, but he was clear that he wanted to do all that we could to make sure we were being as supportive as possible to President Calderón in his effort to establish and strengthen public security. It was clear from the news that there was a lot of violence going on. President Obama wanted to make sure that we focus on providing the help that President Calderón needed.

*Did Obama give you any concrete guidelines?*

Well, I got a letter from the president that laid out specific issues and objectives.

*What did it say?*

I don't remember the specifics. It was two pages. All ambassadors get a letter from the president, not just ambassadors to Mexico. It is a standard thing. They lay out a number of priorities, some of which are bureaucratic and administrative priorities that are your responsibility as ambassador, and some of which are programmatic or foreign policy priorities for the relations with that country. We had a good talk about things which were his biggest priorities, and his biggest priorities were supporting President Calderón in his effort to restore and strengthen public security, which he believed was important to keeping the broad relationship on track.

*When you arrived in Mexico, did you have to apologize for WikiLeaks?*

I did not apologize. I focused on the positive message. On how important the relationship is and on doing all we could to make sure this was a strong relationship and we

had the closest possible collaboration between our officials. I really avoided going into what might have happened earlier.

*How was your relationship with Calderón?*

I felt that we had a very good relationship to talk through difficult issues, and we could talk about a range of issues. We would see each other at bigger public events, but we would also have small meetings to discuss some of the difficult issues that needed to be worked through. Yes, I had access to him whenever I needed. Of course, he had access to me whenever he wanted to have access to me.

*And with his cabinet?*

I also had very good access to members of his cabinet, with the foreign minister, with the attorney general and with the secretaries of *gubernación* and public safety. It wasn't Poiré<sup>7</sup> at first, he was at CISEN,<sup>8</sup> I'm referring to the gentleman that died in a helicopter crash.<sup>9</sup> Poiré came to *gubernación* after that. We also had a good relation with García Luna, Secretary of Public Safety at the time.<sup>10</sup> Also, with the secretaries of communications and transportation, and health. With everybody because the U.S.-Mexico relationship it is so intense that you have all agencies, practically, from both governments talking to each other on a regular basis working on very complex agendas. We were working very hard to make sure we were progressing across that range of relationships and not just focusing on the security relationship. Though I knew that we had to get the security issues right, one of my big convictions was that we still needed to keep working to find progress on all the other aspects of the relationship that were just as important. We share a 2000 miles border. All sorts of things happen, good and bad. We need to pay attention.

*How would you describe Calderón?*

As a serious person with strong opinions. Of course, for me, coming in as an American, I was not steeped in Mexican politics. The president had allies and people that were

7 Alejandro Poiré, Secretary of *Gubernación*, 2011-2012.

8 Center for Investigation and National Security.

9 Francisco Blake Mora, Secretary of *Gubernación*, 2010-2011.

10 Arrested by U.S. law enforcement officials on drug-related charges in 2019, Genaro García Luna is currently awaiting trial in New York. Suspicions among U.S. officials that García Luna was more willing to go after some criminal groups than others, don't appear to have hindered the relation with him at the time.

less allied to him. Especially in the federal and sub federal levels. There were difficulties in cooperation with certain governors, for example. When we would talk, those things would come up. But I found him to be very thoughtful, very committed. He also would pay a lot of attention to detail.

*Did he have a temper?*

I didn't see his temper. I've heard he might have had one. But whenever we were talking it was very straight forward, very reasonable discussion, and tempers didn't get involved in that. We always had very good, solid, reasonable discussions about even very difficult issues.

*Do you think he trusted you?*

Well, I would like to think so. In the U.S.-Mexico relationship there are elements of trust and distrust on both sides and so you were always in many ways trying to expand the areas of trust and shrink the areas of distrust. Part of the complexity was that there was nobody on either side that could control all the actors even on their own side of the table.

*Can you explain?*

For example, as you know as a member of the press, there were regularly these articles that would come out that would try to make it look like there were big problems between the two countries. Or stories that were trying to expose new areas of cooperation that were controversial. Those journalists got the information from inside one administration or the other. You needed to manage all of these press stories on both sides of the border so that people really understood what was going on, so that the story wasn't exaggerated or distorted. It doesn't mean there were things the press should not write about, but these are things you can't necessarily control as an ambassador. You try to manage those as they come up. I would work to manage them by talking to my Mexican counterparts, by talking to the press, by calling back to Washington and saying, what's this? It was a regular effort.

*How often did you meet with Calderón?*

I don't feel there was any lack of being able to talk to him. If I asked for a meeting, they would arrange one, maybe not right away, but if we asked for one, we would get one and there were a number of times I asked for them. Similarly with the ministers. I would try to do things with the ministers more often than not because the president's a busy guy. We could fix things at a ministerial level, sort things out, or set up new cooperative efforts. It's not all about fixing problems, it's also about cementing opportunities or actually creating new opportunities.



*Do you recall any specific instance that required you to speak with Calderón in person?*

Yes, when we were thinking through the best strategies for fighting organized crime groups and when there were some needs for some adjustment to cooperation between the various parts of both governments. One of the challenges in working on some of these issues is that there were a lot of different actors in Mexico and in the U.S. working on law enforcement and justice. They didn't always coordinate with each other inside either government. They didn't always get along with each other, and there were rivalries. There were some groups, some people, who trusted each other more than others. What impressed me is that whenever we had those conversations, President Calderón thought about the subject very seriously. He was well informed, and we'd really go back and forth about were the current strategies and cooperative efforts yielding good results, or could we do it better.

*Was he concerned about the lack of coordination between U.S. law enforcement agencies?*

Yes, we discussed the lack of coordination between law enforcement and justice agencies in both countries, and we both worked on trying to make that better. In politics you have a certain rhetoric that you say publicly, which is not necessarily incorrect, but often you're saying it for a certain reason. What we would try to do is make sure we could talk through things so that we could get to solutions. I would spend a lot of time working to try to get people to coordinate better in the U.S. government also. And I tried to get people who sometimes had had experiences, bad experiences a year or two before, to take new approaches to try to create new openings. It took convincing, often people on both sides, both governments. Happily, it worked. I think there was a lot of progress in dealing with some of that, some of those disconnects.

*Did you ask to talk to Calderón when CIA agents were ambushed by Mexican federal policemen?<sup>11</sup>*

Well that's not actually right. There were Americans in the car, there were various people in the car who were associated with the embassy.

---

11 On August 24, 2012, two CIA employees sent to Mexico as part of a multiagency effort to bolster efforts to fight drug traffickers were wounded when gunmen from the Mexican Federal Police fired on an American Embassy vehicle. Randal Archibald and Eric Schmitt, "American Shot in Mexico Were CIA Operatives in Drug War," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2012.

*Two?*

I think there were more people in the car.

*Including one Mexican Navy Captain?*

Maybe it was only three. In any case, yes, that was one of the times that President Calderón and I talked. I also talked to the attorney general, the secretaries of *gobernación* and public safety. It was a very serious incident to have police shooting at a car with U.S. and Mexican officials in it.<sup>12</sup> It was a problem. The initial response from lower-level authorities was not forthcoming. The president did make a call to make sure there was a more forthcoming, immediate and helpful response to what had happened.<sup>13</sup> That opened the door to finding and identifying who had been involved.

*Why fire on an American embassy vehicle with diplomatic plates?*

It was never clear to me. I don't think it was targeting Americans. The initial story they gave was that there had been kidnappers in the area using false plates and they thought these were kidnappers. I don't know what finally happened in that judicial case involving these gentlemen who were doing the shooting. I don't think I ever saw anything that said the case came to a final decision.

*What do you think happened?*

I think they were probably rogue policemen either linked to the cartels or their own efforts to gain extra income. I don't know. They certainly weren't doing this as part of their official authorized activity. In that sense, we are very grateful to the Mexican Navy for arriving on the scene and preventing any of the people in the car from being killed.

*Bizarre.*

It was very bizarre, very scary and very threatening. It could have been much, much more damaging to the individuals as well as to the bilateral relationship.

---

12 "It is clear, as acknowledged by the GOM, that it was the Federal Police who attempted to stop our vehicle, pursued it and opened fire on it at several points during the encounter. Through sustained long arms fire, the attackers managed to penetrate the embassy vehicle's armor and wound the two U.S. personnel occupants inside before disabling the vehicle." Unclassified secret embassy cable sent by Wayne to Washington, August 25, 2012.

13 Wayne met with Calderón on September 6 2012. Calderón said to be "very disturbed" about the incident and promised to carry out an independent investigation. U.S. Embassy declassified cable, September 7, 2012.

*Do you think the intention was to create tensions between the two countries?*

We never had any evidence of anything like that. It was either they thought they were kidnappers, or the police were linked to criminal activities themselves.

*Was it the worst crisis you faced in almost four years as ambassador?*

It was the one that endangered peoples lives the most. The capture and escape of El Chapo was another one.<sup>14</sup> And also a number of the press stories that emerged, especially in *The New York Times*, that were not accurate and were difficult to manage. At least one of those was during the beginning of the Peña years.

*The one about the General Moisés García Ochoa?<sup>15</sup>*

Yes.

*It's not true?*

It's not true, that's why we issued a denial. It was a distortion of the truth. The irony of the gentleman that we allegedly said we didn't want in the Peña Administration was actually quite pro-American. The version that we had vetoed him was just not true. I have no doubt somebody told the journalist (Ginger Thompson) that, but they misled her.<sup>16</sup>

*With what purpose?*

I think it's somebody who maybe had partial understanding of what had been going on and led her in the wrong direction.

*Did you have concerns about who could be in the Peña Nieto cabinet?*

I'd have to think about that. I mean certainly there were individuals that might have been concerning. I think the way to look at the issue is: Peña and his advisors wanted to make sure they didn't bring into the government someone that the U.S. government had very negative information about on ties to criminal activities and that was not known to the incoming government. It's a little bit different from the assumption that the United States

14 On July 11, 2015, México most-wanted drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, escaped from a maximum-security prison near Mexico City.

15 It was believed that General García Ochoa could be promoted to become secretary of defense. Drug Enforcement Administration had suspicions that he had links to drug trafficking. "Hand of U.S. is Seen in Halting General's rise in Mexico," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2013.

16 Ginger Thompson, "U.S. Embassy Denies Intervening in Mexico Cabinet Choice," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2013.

vetoed somebody. When you are vetting candidates for public office, you often ask if you know something bad or have something worrisome about that person.

*There can be different ways to veto.*

I can definitively say we vetoed nobody.

*How was your relation with Peña Nieto in comparison to Calderón?*

It was a good relationship. Peña was well informed on a number of issues. We talked about a range of different things. Calderón would explore the details and the ins and outs of issues. I'd say that wasn't Peña's style. We would talk about broader subjects that were going on, not the detailed ins and outs of what was happening. With Calderón we would talk through the heads of different cartels and how do we get this or that cartel, their strong points and weak points. It was a much broader level of conversation with Peña. He did not get into as many of the details.

*What did you talk about with Peña?*

We would talk about big issues like the importance of developing the economic relationship and how we could do that. We would talk about solidifying the cooperation among the various parts of both governments in the struggle against crime, making sure the ministries were working with each other. He was quite willing to sort difficulties if there were problems of communication or just some parts of the government that weren't being cooperative, but he did not get into as many details and specifics as Calderón did.

*Why?*

I don't know. I think that's the way he governed. Calderón was sometimes accused of being a micro-manager of things and people. I understand where that might come from. I never saw that per se, but I can see that he liked to master, to understand, the details of what he was doing. He would go back and forth and explore them, and that was his way of making a decision and learning. President Peña Nieto would deal with the broad outlines of policy and if there was a problem he would go and focus on that, but he delegated to his ministers to be in charge of the specific implementing policies and that is just a different style of leadership and management.

*How would you describe Peña Nieto?*

As a very congenial and pleasant person. He was enjoyable to talk and work with.

*Did you find his foreign policy more open?*

President Peña was open to taking further cooperation in foreign policy, which traditionally has not been Mexico's priority. It's been, "don't interfere in those other countries, leave us alone, sometimes we'll play on foreign policy but not always." Peña was open to exploring all of that because he was committed to the strategic partnership and to the importance of the relationship with the United States. He liked the idea of building the relationship, not in any one area, but in economics, in education, in entrepreneurship, and in foreign policy cooperation. The same thing was true regarding North America cooperation. We would have very good conversations about that potential.

*Did you get the sense that he was dependent on Videgaray?<sup>17</sup>*

Luis Videgaray is an extremely intelligent, capable individual. He was doubtless the source of many good ideas. But Aurelio Nuño<sup>18</sup> was also very thoughtful. José Antonio Meade<sup>19</sup> was very experienced, very thoughtful and very wise in a lot of things. There were a number of people who were helping with the specific issues who were smart, intelligent, experienced. President Peña Nieto's style was as a big picture guy and a strategy guy. From the start he decided he was going to delegate most everything to his different ministers. He did that with Osorio Chong<sup>20</sup> in *gobernación*, with Videgaray in finance and with Caldwell<sup>21</sup> in *energía*. So that's the way he ran things.

*Did you find Peña Nieto well informed?*

I could have very intelligent conversations with him. Whenever he was in meetings with our leaders, he was very well informed and engaged. I remember one conversation in which he raised with Obama the whole notion of having to get better at dealing with heroin and opioid flows, because Mexico's services were detecting more heroin heading into the U.S. from Mexico. From that conversation they agreed to set up a senior bilateral

---

17 Secretary of Finance and Public Credit, 2012-2016.

18 Chief of Staff of the Presidency, 2012-2015.

19 Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2012-2015.

20 Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, Secretary of *Gobernación*.

21 Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, Secretary of Energy, 2012-2018.



Earl Anthony Wayne and Barack Obama in the White House. *White House Photo Archives.*

working group which we hadn't had before specifically focused on heroin and opioid flows. That was an excellent step forward which I supported. But, in general, it was at that bigger strategic issue that he would focus.

*Why did Peña Nieto's economic reforms did not "save Mexico" as some people predicted?<sup>22</sup>*

The initial reforms steps, which Peña and his team formulated before he got into government, were good. They mobilized an extremely impressive coalition to support the reforms, got them passed and started to implement them—all very successful. But some of that reform package, not all of it, got bogged down in implementation. The energy and telecommunications reforms started yielding very good results for Mexico, even though they're going to take a long time. The education reform was really needed to help young Mexicans. Mexico has the lowest rating in the OECD countries for the quality of its education. But the reform got bogged down in the very complicated issues of union politics among the teachers. It's going to be hard to change that education system, but it's vital for Mexico's future that it be done. On the security front, the Peña Administration came in

---

<sup>22</sup> According to *Time* magazine's "Saving Mexico" cover story, Peña Nieto's "sweeping" economic reforms changed the narrative in his "narco-stained nation." Michael Crowley, February 24, 2014.

riding on the results of a very successful effort by Calderón to get the cartels on the run. The violence under Calderón peaked in December of 2011 or January of 2012 and then started down. Violence and homicides continued down until 2014. That was in good part because the Calderón Administration had made a lot of investment in the law enforcement institutions and the practices.

*Did it change under Peña?*

That was continued by the Peña Administration, but they didn't make adjustments to keep effectively fighting the criminality as criminality changed form, as more smaller groups popped up. They didn't invest enough in strengthening the state level forces to arrest the criminal group lieutenants so they couldn't operate in that state or somewhere else. The violence kept growing and growing and spreading geographically. During the Calderón years the violence was largely concentrated in certain areas where the drug cartels were fighting to control routes for access to the United States. That crime-related violence has now spread widely across Mexico. And its no longer just fighting over drugs that is violent. It never was totally, but serious violence from criminal groups has now spread to all sorts of areas, including extortion, kidnapping, and oil theft, among other areas. The criminals have completely overwhelmed or influenced and bought out many local authorities, so the federal government now has a tremendously difficult task on its hands, and the public saw that. Along with the increased violence, there was never any effective effort to deal with public corruption during my years working with the Peña Administration.

*There are three things that changed the initial positive perception of the Peña Administration: the corruption scandal around the so-called "Casa Blanca,"<sup>23</sup> the disappearance of 43 students<sup>24</sup> and El Chapo's prison escape. Do you agree?*

Yes, I agree. I think almost all the good work, undertaking these very important reforms early in the Peña Administration, got swept away in the public perception because of not handling forcefully the corruption cases that arose, the disappearance and presumed killings

23 The scandal broke in November 2014 when the news website *Aristegui Noticias* revealed that a subsidiary of the company Grupo Higa had built a very large residence designed specifically for Peña Nieto's family. The mansion, in an exclusive part of the capital, was built shortly before he was elected president in 2012, while he was governor of Mexico State.

24 On September 26, 2014, 43 male students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College were forcibly abducted and then disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero. They were allegedly taken into custody by local police officers from Cocula and Iguala, in collusion with organized crime.

of the 43 students and then the El Chapo escape from a high security federal prison. In the first two instances, I believe the government could have dealt with the challenges with more serious and honest investigations. The El Chapo case was an easier. There was corruption involved in allowing him to escape, but they were able to find him again. They could do that through targeted intelligence and law enforcement work and by using the more trusted Mexican law enforcement officials that they knew were well vetted. They worked with Americans to get information so that the Mexicans could carry out the law enforcement operations, because we don't carry our law enforcement operations in Mexico. But that was the simplest only in a sense. It was really disturbing when the escape happened. I remember getting the call and letting out a few expletives even though it was a Sunday morning.

*The call was from the DEA?*

Yes. It was not only frustrating for them, however. We had trained all the staff of that prison<sup>25</sup> on best practices using Mérida programs. When we subsequently heard that the prisoners were hearing digging sounds and telling the guards about it and the guards were doing nothing, we knew they must have bought everybody out, or they threatened everybody. Corruption is not just you get paid off, it is sometimes, "We know where your kids are and if you say anything you're not going to see them anymore." It was very, very frustrating. After that, we all launched a 100 percent search for finding information to locate El Chapo. It was not easy but eventually it led to his re-capture.

*Why was there no serious investigation on the missing 43 students?*

I don't know. You'd have to ask the Mexicans. All I know is there wasn't, and we shared that we didn't think it was. But, you know, it's a Mexican domestic investigation.

*Did you conduct your own investigation?*

Nope. We don't carry out criminal investigations in another country. We provided help to the government of Mexico, forensic and expert help, and they conducted the investigation and any needed law enforcement operations.

*Why do you say the Casa Blanca scandal could have been delt better?*

I think it was an opportunity for the Peña Administration to become a champion in fighting corruption. Cases like the *Casa Blanca* where wrong appears to have been one, one

---

25 The Altiplano is a maximum-security federal prison near Mexico City.



should try to turn them to one's advantage by creating an effort to go against corruption and make sure things similar don't happen again. As people said at the time, "Well, there weren't any rules against this kind of stuff." So, make rules to fight corruption going forward. Don't let people do it any more. Move aggressively and if people are found doing it in the future, make them pay a price. How many anti-corruption convictions were there in those years? None.

*Was the Peña Administration insensible to the public uproar over corruption?*

I believe the government needed to launch a really sincere effort to fight corruption. It was particularly damaging for the government because you could just see in Mexican civil society this rising 'we're not going to accept this any more' attitude. People were just more and more fed up with corruption at all levels. You pay the policeman off so you don't get the ticket. But people were increasingly angry about that kind of daily corruption. "We're right next to a country where you get thrown in jail. Doesn't mean there's no corruption, but you have a chance of getting thrown in jail, so why aren't more people getting thrown in jail here." You could see it on Facebook. You could just see this dynamic growing in civil society of Mexicans being fed up with this level of corruption.

*Did you discuss it with Peña?*

It was discussed. Nobody said no. We, on a regular basis, kept saying we should find ways to handle this corruption issue not just with President Peña, but with other members of the cabinet as well. But the actual policy on handling corruption is the decision of an independent government. The people of Mexico wouldn't want the American ambassador dictating to Mexico what the government do.

*Did you offer help to fight corruption?*

What you do is you can make suggestions. We offered various ideas, for example, to bring experts to talk about corruption, to help set best practices in the United States on public disclosures people have to make in the federal government; to bring people to Mexico who do investigations in the United States for inspectors general of agencies and other public organizations so Mexican officials could see how you could put such a system in place. And some of that sharing did go on, but was not to the degree that might have made a difference in popular perception. The biggest challenge, from my perspective, was that there weren't any convictions for corruption. There was just no evidence that the office of the attorney general was going after corruption.

*Did you share with the Peña Administration cases of corruption?*

In the justice conversations and channels there was a lot of exchange of information and discussion of cases. There were a number of cases brought in the United States against Mexican officials for corruption. In fact, there were more cases brought for corruption of Mexican officials in the United States than there were in Mexico. When you're working with another governments, you're a partner, you don't tell them what to do, you can suggest ideas, you can offer to work with them, you can offer assistance, but the officials of Mexico have to decide what they would like to do.

*Did you address with Peña concerns about human rights and impunity?*

We had a regular dialogue with the foreign ministry and *gobernación* on human rights. We would tell them when we thought there were violations that they should have dealt with. We would do this privately. We would do it with military services, and our military would talk to them about it also. We would try to have dialogues and discussions in a very respectful way. We offered assistance. For example, we provided support to establish a dialogue between the government and NGOs working in the human rights area. We funded an NGO to be a mediator to bring together *gobernación* and the human rights NGOs to find ways to work together on the protection of individuals (journalists) and on specific cases. I would bring these topics up with federal officials and also with the governors when there were cases of what looked like very egregious killings or human rights abuses that involved, not federal officials, but state or local officials. And we did have this dialogue talking about military events too. According to U.S. law, we can't have military exchanges of any kind with units that have been tainted by human rights abuses. We did discuss these issues very frankly with both military services (Army and Navy), including at the highest level. We ended up after several years of building trust and confidence having very good discussions. We were able to find ways to discuss these issues and it had to do with building trust and confidence.

*Was the Navy the branch of the armed forces you trusted the most?*

Well, I don't know that I'd want to say that. We had good cooperation with both the Navy and the Army. But what I will say is that both the Navy and the Marines particularly were the most active elements in the efforts to go after capos in general. They were disciplined, very highly skilled and very well trained. We did provide them training and other things. They were the elements that the government of Mexico chose to use regularly. So, we worked with them and had consistently good collaboration.

*Is the Mérida Initiative and the war on drugs a failed strategy?*

The war on drugs was launched by President Nixon in the early 1970s. We now have a massive addiction crisis in the United States. Clearly, it has not been successful. Have there been parts of it that have been successful along the way? Yes. Should there be a reexamination of the take-the-capo-out strategy? Yes. Does it mean you never do that? No, it doesn't, but you do have to look at what happens when you do it. Were the lieutenants in the organization arrested or were they left to roam freely in society and try to make money any way they can? To use violence and steal what they can or kidnap people and get other money? Do you need a justice system that actually convicts people? Yes, you do. Is the United States system perfect? No, it is not.

*What about the finger-pointing that goes on?*

Clearly a lot of drugs get into the United States and travel all over the country. If they come across the Mexican border they still get to Boston or Vermont or San Francisco or Seattle. So yeah, there are problems in the United States too. Do you need to keep working on fixing that? Yes, you do. You need to be smart and that means you need to regularly review what's working and what isn't and try and figure out why it's not working.

*Is using the military to fight cartels working?*

Well, the military worked at finding select individuals that Mexico was targeting. But it was not enough. Were there violations of human rights, errors, people killed that shouldn't have been? Yes. So, what do you do? You try and keep perfecting the system and processes for their involvement. It's important to remember that the Mérida Initiative was not just about the capo strategy. In fact, it was about trying to train people to professional standards. It was about trying to make sure that Mexico had forensic experts that actually knew how to collect the evidence and present it. It was about having police standards, salaries, training and advancement people could be honorable policemen for 25 years and be respected. It was about having youth centers in Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Monterrey that got young people from these endangered neighborhoods to come in and have other activities than to just hang out with the gangs. All these were good things. Did they get followed up on? Did they get expanded? Did they become institutionalized practices? That's where the problems arose.

*What now?*

I believe strongly that what needs to happen on a regular basis now is you actually have to have both sides sit down and have a really honest review of what's working and not working. In the United States that means we have to spend more money on addiction programs and prevention programs. No question about that. The solution is not to say it's been a failure and that we are going to stop doing things together. You can't do that. You've to try to refine what you are doing and get better results.

*Did the release from jail of Caro Quintero created tensions in the relationship?<sup>26</sup>*

It did. Somebody got bought off. It was a surprise to us when he was released. It's an example of targeted efforts to use corruption to get people free. It works, sometimes.

*Would you say corruption is part of Mexico's culture?*

I wouldn't say its part of the Mexican culture per sé. The Mexican culture is much deeper and broader than that, but it is part of the Mexican practice for many recent decades and unless you have consequences for this kind of practice it's going to spread. In the United States, we have corruption, we probably have too much corruption, but we do have checks and balances. People do get caught, periodically, and they get brought to trial, and they get thrown in jail for doing it. You've got to have deterrent, checks against this normal temptation of humans. Sadly, as a group, we seem to be that way. Mexico just haven't had that set of deterrents. It gets back to impunity. If you have impunity, how are you going to stop things like corruption. It's not just you're not going to stop homicides or robberies with words or even arrests. You're not going to stop any of this criminal activity if there is impunity. The justice system doesn't work well. That's one of the very sad things about the Mexican justice reform.

*Why sad?*

The justice reform was initiated because the Mexican justice system was convicting a lot of innocent people, and law enforcement elements were using torture to get confessions. People would sit in jail falsely accused, and finally after three years they'd get their hearing and they would get out. That helped spur justice reform. But the reform was being very poorly implemented, so criminals are getting out. That is really frustrating. You've got

---

26 Caro Quintero, the co-founder of the now-disintegrated Guadalajara Cartel, accused of ordering the kidnapping and killing of a DEA agent, was freed from jail on August 9, 2013 by a state court in Guadalajara. His release outraged the Obama Administration. After 9 years as a fugitive, Caro Quintero was finally arrested July 15, 2022. The U.S. has asked for his extradition.

to do these things well, and early. You've got to examine how they're going forward and make corrections along the way. I do not believe that Mexicans are innately more corrupt or more violent or more criminal. They are not. But if you don't have a functional system, there are certain members of society that will do those bad things. Some of them will do it anyway, but there's another group that won't do it if there's no impunity, if the law enforcement and justice systems provide deterrence.

*Did Secretaries Clinton and Kerry have the same level of interest on Mexico?*

Clinton was more engaged. It's not that Secretary Kerry thought Mexico wasn't important, but his "these are important" list was a lot longer. Secretary Kerry was always going around the whole world. He came one time to Mexico when I was there and had a very good visit. Secretary Clinton did travel a lot, but she had come to understand early on in her tenure that Mexico is really important—even before I was asked to be ambassador—that Mexico has these really big challenges and it's important that we pay attention. What we did do in those second term years with Kerry in the Obama Administration is we developed something called the High-Level Economic Dialogue, with the secretary of commerce and the secretary of homeland security playing key roles. They filled in that attention gap and showed that it didn't need to be the foreign minister.

A lot of what we do in Mexico is something called "intermestic," it's international and domestic at the same time. Mexico is our second largest client in the world. So, from the secretary of commerce's point of view, if she wants to support the American economy, she needs to support the relationship with Mexico and Canada. Penny Pritzker<sup>27</sup> did that. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson also saw that this is a tremendously important relationship. He made regular visits to Mexico. We regularly worked on the border, and it was a combination of enforcement and facilitation. It was a two-way thing. You want legitimate traffic and legitimate commerce to go fast, but you also want to stop the illegitimate stuff. Secretary Johnson and his predecessor, Janet Napolitano, knew how important relations with Mexico were, and they realized that it wasn't just about enforcement, it was about facilitation of legitimate trade and transport. They came regularly to work on that and so did Penny Pritzker.

*The High-Level Economic Dialogue, who's idea was it?*

---

27 Secretary of Commerce, 2013-2017.

We started raising the idea that we needed an overarching economic relationship, and not just covering economics and trade, but also things like education and promoting innovation between the countries. We needed ways to help tie the two countries together in constructive ways. After a good deal of discussion, we came out with this idea of a high-level economic dialogue that can deal with that. My hunch is that President Obama asked Vice President Biden if he could help out and pull this all together. Vice President Biden agreed to chair it, but the two driving forces in the cabinet were Penny Pritzker and Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson. John Kerry, Secretary of Treasury Jack Lew and others would also participate. Same thing on the Mexican side. By combining security and economics, we created a big umbrella to actually address the whole range of issues that either could divide or unite Mexico and the United States. Finance Minister Luis Videgaray was the driving force on the Mexican side.

*Was it successful?*

It made it a lot easier to deal with the difficult issues because you have these win-win issues out there that you were working on at the same time. If there was a problem it was dealt with in the context of a number of other beneficial issues. You could help solve the problem and still be working together positively on a number of other issues. This actually created the most comprehensive working relationship between the United States and Mexico we had during these years. That was a change in mentality. It wasn't that way when I first arrived, it was people pointing and saying, "Well, they're the ones at fault, they caused it, no, no you caused it." We got beyond that for those years.

*Did you meet with the 2012 presidential candidates in the Embassy?*

Not in the embassy, but in my house or a neutral place. I talked to them about all the things we were doing with the bilateral relationship and about how important the relationship was. I discussed the work on economics and on security. I told them that we hoped to continue and deepen that relationship. I had run into some of them ahead of time at other events, but we hadn't had serious discussions. They were all good conversations, including with López Obrador, and in that case, we had a lunch together at a place that was neutral. Somebody's apartment.

*Whose apartment?*

Somebody.

*What's the name of that somebody?*

Héctor Vasconcelos<sup>28</sup> organized the lunch as his diplomatic advisor.

*Were you concerned about any of the leading 2012 candidates?*

No. We weren't particularly concerned about any of the candidates, or the elections. But it was pretty clear that the PRI was going to win.

*Did you give press conferences?*

I gave a bunch of interviews. I didn't use Twitter, but we used Facebook a lot. We grew our Facebook followers from about 5-10,000 when I first got there to almost a million when I left.

*Were your decisions have to be cleared with Washington?*

We had a fair amount of autonomy. Nowadays is very easy to communicate with Washington about the kinds of things we were going to do. Emailing them or just copying them on messages. We would run our days by ourselves. It was only if there was some big issue, we would coordinate fully ahead of time at more senior levels. If we needed, for example, if there was big public issue, we would want to coordinate with Washington. Or, if the issue involved the military, we would coordinate with the U.S. Northern Command, so we're saying the same thing, because if you don't say the same thing you get in trouble, so we would coordinate. There were big issues that we would want to have a discussion with Washington and with other agencies in Washington to figure out how to handle it.

*Can you give examples of those instances?*

One example is when El Chapo Guzmán escaped from jail. We immediately started calling everybody around the U.S. interagency to have a coordinated response. We knew that that people would start giving their unilateral impressions of it. It was necessary to have all the U.S. centers of authority saying something pretty consistent. We would also coordinate things with the government of Mexico. Coordinating between the two governments was not the practice when I first went to Mexico.

*Did you also coordinate what to say after the ambush of CIA?*

Yes, we did. On key things like that we worked to make sure not that we had to say exactly the same thing, but that we talked to one another and understood what we were each going to say about it.

---

28 Senator for Morena, López Obrador's party.

*Who were your contacts in Washington?*

It was Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, or her principal deputy. It was also the senior director of the National Security Council which was Ricardo Zúñiga. First it was Dan Restrepo, then it was Zúñiga. For a while it was also White House Homeland Security Director and then CIA Director John Brennan. He had a big interest in Mexico on security issues. We would coordinate with the CIA. When I first arrived to Mexico, the CIA Director was David Petraeus. I had worked with him very closely in Afghanistan so I knew him very well. Before he became CIA Director, he and Bob Zoellick wrote a report on the importance of North America for the Council on Foreign Relations. Petraeus very much knew how important Mexico was to the United States.

*Did you have many official visitors when you were ambassador?*

Yes, it was good to have all those people come in. It was one of the things that you learned. That this relationship is not just a federal-to-federal relationship. We were regularly getting governors and businessmen visiting. Governor Jerry Brown came down from California. He invited Peña Nieto to go up to California. I went up with Peña Nieto for that visit in July of 2014. This state and city level connection is a really important part of the Mexico-U.S. relationship that needs to be regularly strengthened and given attention.

*Was there anything that struck you from Obama's visits to Mexico?*

What struck me was how popular he was with Mexicans. I remember the first time he went to Mexico City, we were surprised by these big crowds of people that came out to welcome his motorcade on the streets completely unorganized. He was just very popular.

*What did Obama say?*

I remember riding over with him in his limousine to dinner with Peña Nieto at Los Pinos. That was exciting, just riding in that big limousine and talking to him on the way over about Mexico and Peña Nieto. He was interested in what's happening with politics, what's Peña doing, what's he going to do.

*How did you handle the lack of security for American tourists as described in the State Department's travel warnings?*

One of the things we did while I was there was to make sure to go to the level of the states in describing the security situation, and even different parts of the states, so that the warning system could allow readers to understand which parts were really danger-



ous and not just think all of Mexico is dangerous. We tried to be as specific as possible so people could still enjoy certain areas, but with others, they would know not to go there.

*I saw a picture of you on a bicycle. What was that about?*

That was just to support the use of bicycles in Mexico City. I rode from the embassy over to our library, Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin, on my bike with my bodyguards on bikes following me. It was fun!

*Did you have body guards?*

All the time. That's one of the difficult things about being an ambassador.

*How many?*

Six at a time, including the driver. They were very nice gentlemen, but it's not nice to go everywhere with six people all the time. We actually had fewer security personnel in Afghanistan because one didn't want to attract attention. There would be two cars, four (bodyguards), two in each car, all American personnel.

*Are there certain security restrictions for American diplomats in Mexico?*

There are in certain cities, but in Mexico City we don't have any restrictions like that. The security team decided that since I was the ambassador, I could be a target.

*Did you continue sending confidential cables to Washington after Wikileaks?*

Yes, but you're just careful about what you write and about the channels in which you send things, but yes there's still plenty of reporting that goes on.

*Are there fixed parameters that define the relationship with Mexico?*

I would say there are main axes of relations that remain the same, but as we've seen over the past year and a half you can do different things with those axes. What remains constant is the importance of the collaboration between the two countries on economics, on security, and on people-to-people issues. That's because there are so many people that cross the border that have ties in both directions. So much trade—a million dollars a minute on average—goes back and forth. And because we share such a long border, the security issues regarding drugs, other kinds of crime and potential terrorism, are just not going to go away. None of those are going to change in the foreseeable future. You can change the atmosphere, and change the extent of the cooperation, but there are other things that you

do just have to do. You have to manage that border. If you don't manage it well it's going to be very costly on both sides of the border, for example.

*What is your contribution or legacy?*

Helping to bring together a lot of different areas of collaboration and cooperation. Expanding greatly the number of students who were going up the United States. It was a big. Several hundred thousand Mexicans eventually went to the United States for short term study to learn English. The High-Level Economic Dialogue and law enforcement cooperation was working a lot better than it did before. People having more trust with each other. We crossed all of those areas and many others. We actually had a lot of good discussion and good work. That was, I think, my big contribution. Bringing people together and being a successful entrepreneur of cooperation and collaboration.

*Was Mexico your biggest challenge in your diplomatic career?*

Well, it was my biggest mission, by far. Afghanistan was a pretty big challenge, and it was very intense every day in a threatening way, in a way that you often felt that you were in danger. Mexico was a much bigger challenge in that magnitude of the relationship was so much greater and touched so many people's lives potentially. There are so many actors that you had to give a lot of thought and attention to your strategy, tactics and responses. You had to try to anticipate as best you could what might happen, and you had to be ready to respond immediately if something did happen to mitigate negative effects. So, I guess, I would say yes. Certainly, me being solely in charge of the U.S. embassy and mission was the biggest challenge I faced.

*Your greatest satisfaction?*

Seeing people prospering whether they were business people now having new markets, students coming three months to the United States happy they could now speak English more fluently, entrepreneurs that had now gotten an "angel" funder to help them with their idea and NGOs that felt they could now have a little more support for fighting for transparency or fighting for a free press and protecting journalists. All that was enjoyable and very rewarding.

*Any regrets?*

No, I don't think so.





**ROBERTA S. JACOBSON** was born on April 14, 1960, in New York City. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at Brown University and her Master of Arts degree in law and diplomacy at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In 1986, she joined the State Department as a Presidential Management Fellow (civil servant) in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research as an analyst on South America. In 1989, she moved to the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and over the following two decades, she was director of the Office of Policy Planning and Coordination at the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Peru, director of the Office of Mexican Affairs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary and then Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs. She led the U.S. delegation that negotiated the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba. She was nominated to be ambassador to Mexico in June 2015 and confirmed by the Senate in April 2016. She presented her diplomatic credentials in June 2016. She returned to the U.S. in May of 2018. She was awarded the Order of the Águila Azteca by the Mexican government. She retired from the State Department after 31 years of diplomatic service.

Jacobson was a Special Assistant to President Joseph R. Biden and coordinator for the Southwest border at the National Security Council from January through April 2021. She is currently a Senior Advisor at the Albright Stonebridge Group in Washington. Jacobson is a member of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute advisory board, and a board member of the U.S.-Mexico Fulbright Garcia Robles board (COMEXUS), and the Migration Policy Institute.

During Jacobson's 23-month tenure in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, candidate Trump visited Mexico City; drug lord El Chapo Guzmán was extradited to the U.S.; Trump threatened to send troops to Mexico, insisted that Mexico pay for the border wall and deployed the National Guard to the border; Mexico City was struck by a major earthquake; and talks to renegotiate NAFTA began.



## Roberta S. Jacobson

2016–2018

**R**OBERTA S. JACOBSON was the first woman to serve as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in almost 200 years of diplomatic relations. Her tenure, which began on June 20, 2016, marked a historic milestone. As head of the State Department’s Mexican affairs desk in early 2000, where she was in charge of dealing with Mexico on a daily basis, and then as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Jacobson was well versed on Mexico and familiar with its political class. Unlike some of her predecessors, Jacobson was widely welcomed. “She stands out for an outstanding diplomatic career in the foreign service and public administration of her country,” said the Mexican Foreign Ministry in announcing the agrément for Jacobson.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps with the exception of Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow, Washington had not previously sent an ambassador with such deep knowledge of the nuances of Mexican affairs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Ministry of Mexico, “Benepósito por el nombramiento de nueva embajadora de Estados Unidos en México,” June 1, 2015.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico City had been without an ambassador for close to a year. The U.S. Senate delayed Jacobson's confirmation due to the resentment of a Republican senator<sup>2</sup> over the restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba, which she had negotiated. When she finally arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, the presidential race between Hillary Clinton, Jacobson's former boss at the Department of State, and Donald Trump was in full gear. Jacobson did not resign after Clinton's stunning defeat. She was naïve to think, she now admits, that Trump would change his hostile policies toward Mexico.

During the 15 months that Jacobson served as Trump's ambassador in Mexico, she contended with two challenges: defending a president with whom she had deep policy disagreements and dealing with a Mexican foreign minister who largely bypassed traditional channels such as the embassy to deal directly with the president's son-in-law.<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2016, when Clinton was ahead in the polls, Mexican Finance Minister Luis Videgaray invited candidate Trump to Mexico. Jacobson was not informed ahead of time. The Obama Administration and the Clinton campaign were deeply upset with the Mexican government. Trump's presence in Mexico City, where President Enrique Peña Nieto welcomed him in Los Pinos, the presidential mansion, was seen by the Clinton camp as interference in the U.S. election and a sign that Mexico was betting on the rival horse.

From day one of the Trump Administration, Jacobson witnessed the disarray of the relationship and a heightening of tensions. In his first call to Peña Nieto in January 2017, President Trump called the Mexican military inept and threatened to send troops so they could do their job of fighting the Mexican cartels. A presidential summit organized by Kushner and Videgaray collapsed after Trump tweeted that he did not want to see Peña Nieto if he continued refusing to pay for the border wall. Every time there was a slight chance of a Trump-Peña Nieto meeting, Trump would make sure to sabotage it by insulting the Mexicans. Peña Nieto left office in December 2018 without meeting Trump as president.

Aware of Jacobson's negligible influence in the Trump Administration, Videgaray bypassed her and dealt directly with Kushner. During the last two years of the Peña Nieto Administration, which coincided with the first two of the Trump Administration, the relationship evolved according to whatever Kushner and Videgaray, by then Secretary of Foreign Relations, agreed on. Videgaray visited Washington nearly 30 times. Jacobson had

---

2 Marco Rubio (R-FL), member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

3 Jared Kushner, White House Senior Advisor, married to Ivanka Trump.

no high-level interlocutors in Washington. Neither the State Department nor Kushner’s office briefed her. The secretary of state did not take or return her calls. Her expertise and counseling were largely ignored. When Kushner visited Mexico City in March 2018, he deliberately left Jacobson out of the meetings he had with Peña Nieto and Videgaray.<sup>4</sup>

But that did not stop Jacobson from doing her job in other areas. She traveled to regions outside Mexico City, admiring Mexico’s rich geography, cuisine, arts and crafts, traditions and, above all, the talent and courage of the many Mexicans she interacted with. She raised her voice against the assassinations of journalists and violence against women; she denounced human rights violations and promoted education. She attended LGBTQI+ marches. She joined American rescuers who traveled to Mexico to help after the devastating 2017 earthquake. She used the ambassador’s official Twitter account to communicate with Mexicans. When she announced that she was returning to the U.S. “to seek other opportunities,” many regretted her departure in social media, with some calling her “the best U.S. ambassador ever.”

I interviewed Roberta on the cold winter day of November 15, 2018, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. We hadn’t spoken for quite some time. For more than two hours, she candidly shared with me her singular experience in Mexico, from the day she was unexpectedly nominated to be ambassador, to the day she could no longer stand it and resigned.



#### *How did your nomination come about?*

As you know, Maria Echaveste was nominated; I confess I was disappointed I had not been nominated because Secretary Kerry and people at the White House knew I wanted that job, but I worked really hard to get her confirmed, I really liked her. When she withdrew, I was in Boston with Secretary Kerry for his trilateral meeting with Meade<sup>5</sup> and John Baird<sup>6</sup> of Canada. I was literally on my way to his house with his Chief of Staff Jon Finer in a car

4 Brandon Carter, “Kushner leaves U.S. Ambassador to Mexico out of meeting with Mexican President: report,” *The Hill*, March 7, 2018.

5 Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary, 2012-2015

6 Canadian Foreign Relations Minister, 2011-2015

and Finer showed me an article saying Echaveste was withdrawing. I didn't know that was coming. We got to the Secretary's house, Finer told the secretary about this. At the end of the dinner the secretary said to me, "Do you want the job?" And I said to him, "you know what Mr. Secretary, I feel a little bit like one of those people who got dumped by her boyfriend and it's been six months and she's finally getting over it and he wants to come back. I feel like I was just getting over not going to Mexico and now you're asking me to open this up again." I said, "I think I want it but will you give me till Sunday, it was Friday, to give you an answer, talk to my husband?" He said, "Of course, but I want it quickly because I want to go the White House and tell them that now they should appoint the person that they should have appointed in the first place." On Sunday, I reached out to him and told him I want the job. Relatively quickly after that the White House said yes and the nomination papers began. I had done those already before when I was assistant secretary so it wasn't that hard.

*Did you anticipate problems in your confirmation?*

Yes, I knew there would be problems, so did the White House, so did Kerry. I had led the Cuba negotiations, Rubio had held me for six months the first time,<sup>7</sup> even though I wasn't as senior and didn't have that much to do with Cuba. This time he was running for president.

*Did you ever consider withdrawing your nomination?*

No, not for a minute. I really wanted this job. Maybe naively, I believed they would come to a deal with Rubio. In the end, the deal with Rubio was much more complicated than just me and Cuba because then Cruz<sup>8</sup> got involved on a China issue, then Corker<sup>9</sup> got involved. The White House had like three different things they had to solve to make the nomination go forward. Denis McDonough<sup>10</sup> kept telling me it's getting worse but I promise you we'll get it through. And they finally did.

*Did you know President Obama?*

I did know him, but not that well; I'd certainly been in meetings with him. In Cartagena<sup>11</sup> in 2012 is where I got to know him the best with Secretary Clinton in lots of hold

---

7 In 2011, for Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

8 Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas.

9 Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee.

10 Obama's Chief of Staff, 2013-2017.

11 VI Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, April 2012.



rooms and preparations for that meeting. And then various White House meetings that I had been in with him including Oval Office meetings with Peña Nieto or Dilma<sup>12</sup> or Harper.<sup>13</sup> I had briefed him ahead of those meetings.

*Did you meet Obama at the White House before leaving?*

No, I don't think they felt they needed that meeting with me. They knew that I knew what we were trying to do with Mexico. I did get the letter, though, everyone gets the letter.

*Why was it that you stayed after Obama left?*

After the election we got an email, all of us ambassadors, which said, "If you are a political ambassador, your resignation letter should be drafted and submitted no later than December 7th and it will be effective no later than January 20th at noon." It didn't say anything about career people, so I called the White House liaison, the presidential personnel person at State, and I said, "Well what about me? I'm not career diplomat, but I'm not a political appointee, either." She said you're career. I asked if I should submit my letter of resignation, even if they don't accept them. It's normal to submit letters of resignation. She said no. They have not asked for letters of resignation from the career people. The fact of the matter is that I was never asked to submit a letter of resignation.

*Were you asked to stay?*

Or to go, no. There were people at the NSC who asked me to stay like first, Craig Deare<sup>14</sup> and then Juan Cruz.<sup>15</sup> Later on, I kept being told by Jared Kushner<sup>16</sup> and his office that they really like me and thank goodness, you know blah, blah, blah, but nothing formal, like we'd like you to stay for another year.

*Did you play a role in Trump's visit to Mexico in 2016?*

As ambassador and our embassy, we couldn't be involved even if they had wanted us involved because he was only a candidate. There was no planning for it. The only part of the embassy that was involved, and that's how I knew about it in advance, was the

---

12 Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil, 2011-2016.

13 Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada, 2006-2015.

14 NSC's senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs, 2017.

15 NSC's senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs, 2017-2018.

16 Senior advisor to his father-in-law, Donald Trump, 2017-2021.

Secret Service that have to provide protection. That visit made it clear from the beginning, that he was going to be different to work with.

*Did the Mexican government tell you that he was coming?*

No, they informed me after I heard about it from the Secret Service. This was all in the space of like three days.

*Did the Mexican government invite Clinton to visit Mexico after Trump had been there, or were they invited simultaneously?*

To be honest, if I sat down with a calendar, I still wouldn't be able to tell you exactly when they conveyed the letter to Trump and exactly when they conveyed the letter to Hillary because two different people conveyed the letters. That's the problem. I think the Trump letter was conveyed through Videgaray<sup>17</sup> and the Hillary letter was left for Claudia<sup>18</sup> to convey to Mack McLarty.<sup>19</sup> She had to get an appointment with McLarty. She was in the States at the time opening the new Counsel in Milwaukee. So, I think the letters were probably delivered at different times, but not weeks apart. The problem was, as I subsequently saw in the letter delivered to Hillary, if the letters were the same, which I don't know because I never saw the letter delivered to Trump. If the letters were the same, they basically said, "We would love you to come visit Mexico at some time in the future." They implied, if not stated, "if you win the election." McLarty read it as an invitation for in the future if you win. The Trump people, either because the letter was different or because it was conveyed with a different oral message, I don't know, took the letter and said, "Okay, great, how's like tomorrow?" They asked to come right away, which I don't think the Mexican government expected. So, the responses were different even if the letters were the same.

*Some people believe that the invitation for Clinton was issued after they had invited Trump...*

Just to make it look evenhanded. I don't know the answer to that. Neither did Claudia Ruiz Massieu who was out of the country when this first started and after the fact. We know that she raised objections.

---

17 Luis Videgaray, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2017-2018.

18 Claudia Ruiz Massieu, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2015-20017.

19 Bill Clinton's Chief of Staff, 1993-1994.

*Did you speak to Peña Nieto about the Trump visit to Los Pinos?*

I didn't talk with him, I talked with Videgaray. I went to see Videgaray either the next day or two days later at his office. I got an initial readout of the meeting from him at his *hacienda* office in Polanco.

*Did the visit have political consequences?*

It had consequences in the *ambiente*. I don't know whether Kerry met with Videgaray again before the election, but I don't think so, or I would have been there. Certainly, John Kerry and the White House were upset about it. I heard that both Secretary Clinton, who was of course running by then, and President Obama, were furious about it. But I didn't see that first hand. People felt like Videgaray was betting on one of the horses. So yeah, they were upset.

*What did they tell you?*

Mostly people were asking me what the heck did I think the Mexicans were trying to achieve by that. They wanted me to explain why they did this. I didn't have a very good answer, because Videgaray didn't really have a good answer. It made no sense what he said that they sent both letters, that they were trying to be even handed.

*Did they say anything to the Mexicans?*

Not through me. But I don't think they said anything because they knew that it was going to get back to Videgaray and Peña Nieto that it infuriated them, but I did not hear specifically that they said so directly. They also knew, given the reaction in Mexico, that they didn't need to pile on. Peña Nieto was already taking a lot of shit for doing this.

*Did you mention to Videgaray that you thought was a mistake?*

Absolutely. We got together once in the period between when he was fired and when he came back as foreign minister, and that is when I told him. It might have been a month afterwards.

*What did he say?*

You know, Videgaray is always so sure of himself, he's so confident, I don't think he defended it per se. He was defending the invitation but not the visit. He claimed they sent two invitations and it wasn't his fault that only one was accepted. And I said you didn't have to accept. If Trump says he'll come and you haven't heard anything from



Roberta S. Jacobson in an interview after the 2017 Mexico City earthquake. *Jacobson's personal archives.*

Hillary Clinton, let me assume that you delivered both letters at the same time, then all you say is no, you can't have only one candidate, why did you have to say yes? He didn't really have a good answer for that. But he also defended it as giving what Trump had said about Mexico, they thought it was important that they reach out, that they convey a desire to have a more positive relationship. And my answer was that I can understand but it doesn't have to be the visit, that's all. I left it at that because I wasn't going to get involved in my national politics either.

#### *Was it Mexican interference?*

Of course, it was. I talked to people, colleagues of mine, where we said, can you imagine if we did something like this? When Joe Biden<sup>20</sup> came to Mexico in the run up to the Mexican 2012 election, he saw every freaking candidate to make sure it was even handed. He saw everybody, they trooped in because we didn't want to be accused of meddling in the Mexican elections. But sometimes the reverse is not always true somehow.

#### *Did the visit to Mexico help Trump get elected?*

There were some people who said that was the day that Trump's campaign went up because he was treated like a president, but most of the people who said that to me were

---

20 Then Vice President Biden visited Mexico City in March 2012.

Mexicans not Americans, because most Americans didn't pay enough attention to it for it to really make a difference in how they were going to vote.

*What do you make up of Videgaray's excuse that the markets were reacting badly to Trump's attacks on Mexico?*

Right, except that the visit didn't go the way they wanted. They stood up there having agreed to take no questions and then Trump took questions. If that was the reason, it was really not well thought through.

*How did you get along with Peña Nieto?*

I always got along with him very well.

*How much access did you have to him?*

I had access when I really needed it. I did not use it that often, partly because with Videgaray, I knew that in the end that was the guy I had to go to anyway. I went to Francisco Guzmán<sup>21</sup> often, or I went to Videgaray, but I didn't go to Peña Nieto that often. The one thing I have to say about Peña Nieto is I've never seen anybody so unfailingly polite. He is incredibly well mannered and polite even when he's delivering a tough message.

*What do you mean?*

The only time I saw him deliver a really hard message in person was Tillerson's second visit in February of 2018.<sup>22</sup> There had been another presidential phone call which was designed to go well and to be a positive because there was this idea that the president might invite Peña Nieto to Camp David and they might have a summit. Instead, President Trump went off message. Not only talked about paying for the wall, which they had agreed not to talk about, but he also talked about "your military" and all sorts of other things again. And it went very badly. So, when Tillerson was there, soon after, to try and make things better, that was the first time I saw Peña Nieto give a really hard message, "We just cannot continue to have that conversation," he told Tillerson. But even in that meeting, where Peña Nieto did all the talking, Tillerson listened almost the whole time, he did not say very much and that was unusual too, Peña Nieto was polite.

---

21 Chief of Staff, 2015-2018.

22 Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State, 2017-2018, visited Mexico City twice, in February of 2017 and of 2018.

*Who else was in the meeting?*

On our side, it would have been Tillerson, Margaret Peterlin, his chief of staff, myself, either my DCM or somebody else from the Embassy to take notes, and that's about it, and someone from the Bureau, maybe Paco Palmieri.<sup>23</sup> On the Mexican side, Videgaray, Francisco Guzmán, Carlos Perez Verdía, coordinator of presidential advisors, and Narciso Campos, he was Videgaray's chief of staff.

*Was it Trump's insistence about Mexico paying the wall that upset Peña the most?*

Peña Nieto said we have a lot of things to work on, whether it's security or NAFTA or a million other things, we can't be talking about who's going to pay for the wall because it's never going to happen. But he said it in the most courteous way. I was so impressed with him. Even though it was late in my tenure, it was perhaps one of the times that I realized that Peña Nieto's actually a really good politician. Many times, Peña Nieto would open those meetings and then he'd turn to Videgaray to run a lot of the meetings, but it was different with Tillerson.

*Was the perception of weakness unfair?*

Should Peña have been tougher? I don't think it would have actually been helpful, but domestically that's a question for Mexico to answer. I think in the end, he was exemplary, he actually showed remarkable, not just curtesy and poise, but he was trying to be strategic. He knew that in the long run he had to get NAFTA 2. And so, he put up with a lot, including, of course, his own popularity rating going down.

*Why did Mexico wait until Obama's last day to extradite El Chapo?*

I can tell you that we wondered whether the Mexicans in some way wanted this done before Trump came into office. But we don't have any proof of that, and no Mexican ever told us that. We just knew that. It was a crazy time, the extradition order got signed and we knew that unless we moved really quickly, with a very small group of Mexicans and a very small group of Americans knowing, he would find a way to file yet another *amparo* in some court somewhere in Mexico. He had lawyers standing by in at least five jurisdictions to file new papers. We had known, just before Christmas or a couple weeks in December, that the decision would come down soon, but we didn't know exactly when.

---

23 Francisco Palmieri, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2017–2018.

*Was it a way of making up after the Trump visit?*

It's possible. Even if it wasn't designed as a gift to Obama, it might have been that they didn't want to give a gift to Trump. It's like releasing the hostages in Iran to Reagan. I don't know. We were so focused on making sure that we actually got him to the United States safely this time and there were no leaks and no escapes, that we really didn't focus on it.

*Was Mexico worried that Chapo was going to reveal names of corrupt officials?*

There were lots of rumors that any trial of El Chapo was going to reveal some ugly things about Mexican governments, but we certainly didn't have any proof of that.

*No proof of drug money linked to politicians?*

I didn't say that. I had no proof that the Mexican government was slow rolling Chapo's extradition because they didn't want the eventual trial. The courts were doing a pretty good job of slow rolling it anyway. The question of money from the Sinaloa Cartel into the government, to be honest, there are and will always be reports of various cartels having paid off various people in the security, judicial and executive branches.

*How credible are those reports?*

All of that information is from people who usually are involved in one way or another, like intelligence information, or DEA information, or somebody else. You hear a lot of this stuff and sometimes we had details and sometimes you're pretty sure, but do you have proof that would stand up in court? Not necessarily.

*Did you express your concern about corruption to Mexico?*

I expressed concern to members of the government about other people in government. But there's not much point in going to the person themselves and saying hey, we think you're dirty. But to somebody else in the government, yes.

*Were you concerned about cabinet members?*

No, not usually cabinet members although on various occasions during the six years of the Peña Administration there were different amounts of information about the various attorney generals.

*Which attorney generals?*

I'm talking about Jesús Murillo Karam<sup>24</sup> and Raúl Cervantes Andrade, the one with the Ferrari.<sup>25</sup> We had information at various times on various attorney generals, but none of it was conclusive.

*What kind of information?*

There were always questions. There have been questions also about Alberto Elías Beltrán, acting attorney general during the last year of the Peña Nieto Administration.

*And about ranking military people?*

There are always allegations, but I would not say that in the case of Cienfuegos<sup>26</sup> you'd have good information that he was corrupt. No.

*How big of a concern was corruption?*

It was a serious concern, especially in our partnerships on counternarcotics. Which is why I made my early remarks to Senate when invited, I believe it was fall 2016, about corruption, which surprised some people.

*Did you address it with Peña himself?*

No, not specifically, although I participated in meetings, with U.S. cabinet secretaries, that included the topic.

*Why did you stay after Trump won?*

There were a lot of people leaving and I knew that if I left then it would just be considered straight political. Like oh, she's a Democrat she doesn't want to work for a Republican. I wouldn't stand out much because there'd be a lot of people leaving, but if I stayed, I could number one, try and influence the relationship, and number two, it might make a bigger news story when I eventually left. So, I decided to give it a try, and somewhat to my surprise they didn't kick me out.

---

24 Mexican Attorney General (2012-2015), resigned in the midst of a popular outrage over his handling of the abduction and presumed massacre of 43 students.

25 In 2017, Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity reported that Cervantes owned a Ferrari, valued in 218,000 dollars. Soon after, Cervantes resigned.

26 Salvador Cienfuegos, Secretary of Defense, 2012-2018. The now retired General was arrested in 2020 in Los Angeles on drug related charges. A month later, the Trump Administration dropped the charges against him and agreed to send him back to Mexico to defuse a potential major diplomatic crisis.



*Did they ask you to stay?*

When I was resigning, Tillerson asked me to stay a little longer, because at that point he thought he had a replacement who was his friend from AT&T, Ed Whitacre.<sup>27</sup>

*Did you have hopes Trump would change?*

I think I knew that he wouldn't, but yes, I kind of naively hoped he would, in part because I loved my job and I was hoping he would change so I could keep my job for a little longer. So yeah, I was a little innocent and I was hoping he would.

*Did you meet Trump in person?*

No, never.

*How did you manage?*

I would get asked questions in interviews and stuff about the wall and I would pivot to something else. And I think people in Mexico knew that I was initially Obama's ambassador. It gave me a bit of a pass in a way, they were kinder to me than they otherwise might have been, because they knew that I was going to have trouble defending these things, but they were right to expect me to somehow square that circle, figure out a way to both continue to be positive about the relationship and defend the president. Eventually I just couldn't do that.

*What bothered you the most about Trump?*

There are two things that are connected. One is the overall ignorance. Just so much he has no idea what he is talking about Mexico and how important it is for the U.S. every-day. Number two, it's that every time he got into trouble, every time he got into any pressure, from anything, no matter what the source, he reverted to build the wall and Mexico is sending us drugs and criminals. Those were his default settings. If he was under pressure, he would manufacture a rally and go yell, "Build the wall, build the wall." Or tell his followers, "Mexico is sending us all these drugs and criminals." So, I found it really offensive that Mexico was the designated punching bag. It was the way to rile up the base.

*Did you tell that to Tillerson or Kushner?*

---

<sup>27</sup> Ed Whitacre, former Chairman and CEO of AT&T, was chosen by Tillerson for ambassador to Mexico, but the White House never announced the designation even though the Mexican government granted the agreement.

Of course, of course. Kushner was a little less easy to convey. I certainly conveyed it to his people, to John Rader, a good guy who knew nothing about Mexico, who came down to Mexico a few times. I told him some things I thought were relevant in terms of what he could expect, when Videgaray could deliver and when he couldn't. Kushner's response was a little bit patronizing to me. Saying things like, "Well, in my experience." The guy is 37 years old, and I've got 31 years of experience, the last decade working with Mexico, and I was getting a little bit of a "nice girl" pat on the head? It was just infuriating.

### *Did your access to the Mexican government change under Trump?*

In many agencies and offices, it changed very little. It didn't change with Ildelfonso Guajardo,<sup>28</sup> or with his team at *economía*. It didn't change at *hacienda*. It didn't really change with *presidencia*. But it did change with the foreign ministry. Videgaray very quickly made it obvious that he was going to go directly to the White House and that sometimes he would tell me things and sometimes he wouldn't. The worst part though was that I wasn't getting debriefed from the White House. If Videgaray went up to Washington and he saw Tillerson, or he saw Jared, I wasn't getting the debriefs. Videgaray quickly realized that and lots of times he was giving me a debrief that my government should have been giving me and he loved that.

### *Why?*

That made him feel very powerful and as if I was expendable. Clearly, I couldn't be very important to him if Washington wasn't using me. They began to sort of narrow my role because he was going directly to the White House and Kushner was going directly back to him sometimes talking with us, but sometimes not. So, they were basically reducing the traditional role of an ambassador to much less, much less. And Videgaray knew that.

### *Were you able to meet with Videgaray?*

When I called and wanted to see him, or I had something that I wanted to deliver, he saw me and, to his credit, he did most of the time.

### *So, what was the problem?*

I still felt like I was brushed off more than I otherwise would have been if they had felt I was an intimate part of the White House. If you're an ambassador and the foreign minister or president knows you're close to the White House, you're close to the State Depart-

---

28 Secretary of the Economy, 2012-2018



Ambassador Jacobson visiting the “maestro de maestros” of the rebozo in Tenancingo, Don Evaristo Borras. *Jacobson’s personal archives.*

ment, they’ll include you in things, they’ll talk to you, they’ll ask your advice about things. That got greatly reduced because Videgaray could see that I wasn’t being included, and these people don’t include ambassadors. At the end of my tenure there were a number of times when Videgaray would come to me and say, “I don’t know what to do, he’s just put out another tweet.” Videgaray felt that it was going to get better and it didn’t, and so towards the end he actually was asking for my advice on things, which was ironic because he was sort of desperate to try and turn the relationship around.

*Was it an indication that Kushner could no longer control Trump’s worst impulses?*

Well, he never could. It was getting to the point where the pressure on the Mexicans at home was increasing to push back. Videgaray would call me and say, “Look, there’s been another tweet and we’re going to have to put out a statement. We’re going to have to push back.” And I would say, “Well, I understand and I would let Washington know.” Videgaray had at least given me a heads up.

*To what extent was Kushner a moderating influence on Trump?*

There was a brief period when I think he got the President to stop raising payment for the wall, a couple of months, but it wasn’t permanent.

*Did Kushner and Videgaray help calm Trump down?*

I think that was their intention and that sometimes it helped, but in the end, it only happens if Trump wants it to happen. Yes, we got a NAFTA agreement, but there were a

lot of other things that they were going to work on getting agreements on that we never got. Areas like migration and security. The original idea was that it was going to be this big package, “NAFTA plus.” They didn’t get any of the stuff Mexico might have wanted or we might have wanted as part of a larger package because in the end, it’s all down to Trump. He doesn’t want the rest of that stuff to happen.

*Did Kushner convince Trump not to pull out of NAFTA?<sup>29</sup>*

Videgaray certainly had a lot to do with how that got resolved because he got a presidential phone call set up. I assume he went to Jared to get that done. I think the presidential phone call<sup>30</sup> that they ultimately had did help avert disaster.

*Was the State Department briefed on the Videgaray-Kushner meetings?*

At the beginning they weren’t and they were furious about it. The relationship between Tillerson and Kushner was always difficult, always, until the very end.

*Why?*

Because Tillerson didn’t like Kushner doing his job. It’s logical. Pompeo<sup>31</sup> and Kushner have a much better relationship, but then eventually Kushner’s office began including Kim Breier.<sup>32</sup>

*What was your involvement in Kushner’s trip to Mexico<sup>33</sup> soon before you left?*

They just never invited me to the meetings, and I would say to you, Kushner came to meet with me first in my office before he went to the Mexican ministries. His people kept telling me, “Well, you know, we haven’t done the manifest for the meeting and we don’t know who’s in it yet.” The truth was I had mixed feelings about being in the meetings in the first place because I didn’t know whether it might end up being a one-on-one and I did not want to be in any one-on-one meeting with Kushner. Kushner and Peña Nieto, Kushner and Videgaray.

---

29 On April 27 2017, Trump threatened to “terminate” NAFTA because Mexico and Canada were “being very difficult.”

30 Trump spoke to Peña Nieto on April 27, 2017.

31 Secretary of State, 2018-2021.

32 Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2018-2019.

33 Kushner visited Mexico City on March 7, 2018.

### *Why?*

In case Kushner ends up being hauled in front of Robert Mueller.<sup>34</sup> I didn't want to be the only U.S. witness to this. In the end they were not one-on-one meetings but I didn't know that. I could have pushed hard to try and get into the meetings, but to be honest, I almost certainly would have been told no, and it would have been more embarrassing to me. If they wanted me to be in the meetings, they would have asked me to be in the meeting, otherwise all I was going to do was humiliate myself by asking.

### *How was your relationship with Kushner?*

It was fine. Ironically when he came to Mexico, came to my office, he walked in and I stood up and extended my hand to shake his hand and he said, "Oh, I feel like I know you, I want a hug."

### *What's your sense of him?*

I just found him sort of like a Stepford husband or something. Did you ever see *The Stepford Wives*? Like it's hard to get any reaction out of him, and that was why when he walked in and he wanted to hug me I was so shocked because it seemed such a surprising expression of affection. How great I was doing and how they respect me and admire me, and yet, in the meeting itself, I don't think he really heard my counsel. But he was perfectly nice. He's polite.

### *Did he like Mexico City?*

Absolutely. The first time Kushner went to Mexico City was like holy crap, it's like New York. He was surprised. That happened to dozens of people I saw. Congressional delegations; I met with a Maryland State delegation once in Puebla and they couldn't believe what Guadalajara and Puebla were like. I think they thought it was going to be like donkeys and burros and shootouts in the streets, a combination of stereotypes. It was just ridiculous.

*Were you briefed on the first call between Peña Nieto and Trump in January of 2017, before it got leaked?*

Yes.

---

<sup>34</sup> Special Council overseeing an investigation into allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections.

*What was the fallout of the leak?*

The fallout in Mexico it was sympathy for Peña Nieto. Like it's as bad as you thought it was, and I almost think there was a certain amount of sympathy for Peña Nieto, briefly, because he had actually done pretty well, just not to hang up on the guy. But on the same time seeing how outrageous Trump was there were obviously people who thought that Peña Nieto should have been tougher. So that might have been the beginning of those problems too, or made them worse for Peña domestically. Every time the White House and Los Pinos got close to thinking there could be a meeting, Trump did something that sabotaged it.

*Were you concern with Peña Nieto's decision to review counternarcotic cooperation with the U.S.?*

Videgaray and Los Pinos told me essentially don't worry about it, we have to do something, we can't keep just taking these insults, but we're not going to stop any cooperation. And Videgaray said to me that it was never his intention to actually do it. They're going to review it, but they're not going to stop anything that's useful. Two or three weeks later, I called him because we were having trouble with certain ministries.

*Which ministries?*

The Attorney General and a few others. And everything seemed to be slowing down. When you asked why, they would say, "Well, you know, we have to review these agreements, the President said." So, I went back to Videgaray and said you may not think this is serious but some of those ministries seem to be taking it pretty damn seriously. And he said we're going to have an interagency meeting to make sure everybody understands that we're not slowing down or stopping any of our programs. But some things were still slower afterwards. Some of the military exchange programs, the education, certainly a lot of the law enforcement cooperation and judicial things through the PGR, glacially slow all of a sudden.

*Did the Mérida Initiative continue to be a priority under Trump?*

It was still a priority at least in the first year of Trump, and while Peña Nieto was still in office, although of course, constantly adjusting to new realities of traffickers and, occasionally, the Mexican government. However, during most of the Trump Administration, it got very little attention, except as it might be related to migration.

*Did you have a prepared text for Trump's tweets?*

We never knew when anything was coming. We couldn't have prepared except to the extent that we never commented directly on a tweet. We never said the President's wrong or the President's right about a tweet. We would occasionally put something out afterwards that talked about what we were doing on a certain aspect of the relationship. Mostly we tried not to engage on the tweets, that was for Mexico, and eventually Mexico began responding to many of his tweets.

*Did Mexico coordinate with you?*

Videgaray would usually call me and he would usually show me what they were going to say in advance, like an hour in advance, so that I could give Washington a heads up. I would call both the White House and the State Department and say they're going to have to put something out that pushes back on this. Videgaray says he's going to try not to make it too tough, but they have to respond. And people understood.

*Did your tweets on human rights, violence against woman, and killing of journalists upset the government?*

They occasionally irritated them. I got at least one call from the Peña government after a tweet about Javier Valdez,<sup>35</sup> complaining I was criticizing the government, their interpretation; journalists and human rights activists often thanked me for them.

*Was Washington concerned that AMLO would win?*

Yes, although it wasn't clear to me that everyone was concerned. It seemed to me that the people who were really concerned were the people who didn't know as much about Mexico. Like people at the Treasury Department who don't really work on Mexico were afraid the markets would tank. There were people at the White House who were clearly concerned. I think some of that may have been Kushner because remember: who was he talking to all the time? Videgaray. And one of the things the Peña Nieto government did very effectively was triangulate Venezuela. When they began to be more assertive on Venezuela and leading on Venezuela democracy, they were constantly making allusions to AMLO and Venezuela.

*Is there any truth to that?*

At one time it was that AMLO was getting money from Venezuela, but that had stopped a long time ago. By the time of the 2018 run for the presidency there were a lot

---

35 Javier Valdez Cárdenas, international-awarded Mexican journalist killed in Culiacán in 2017.

of people in the PRI and in the Peña Nieto government who were alluding to the fact that Mexico could become like Venezuela if AMLO won. I'm sure Videgaray said to Kushner AMLO's going to be a disaster if he wins, and Kushner believed everything that Videgaray told him. He thinks Videgaray is brilliant. Videgaray is brilliant and does want a positive relationship, but that doesn't mean that every single thing he said was true. He was also very ambitious and very political.

*Did Kushner believe everything because he's naive and doesn't know Mexico?*

I think that's one thing, and the other thing is this weird tendency that Americans have to think that someone who speaks perfect English is one of us. When they can talk to a person in their native language and that person is so eloquent in their native language, it's like they think immediately that they're smart and they're telling the truth and they must be together with us. There's this weird empathy that takes place. It's unconscious. But the other thing is that there were times during my tenure under the Trump Administration where I felt that Kushner was accepting everything that the Mexicans put on the table.

*Can you explain?*

Vinegary would say, "Look, I think this is the structure of how we should work." Kushner wouldn't convene some experts to talk about whether the U.S. ought to, are those the right issues, is it the right priority, he would just say, "That's great, this is what we are going to do." It really bothered me. Every once in a while, I felt like saying to the Kushner people, "I'm sorry, but did you remember that Videgaray is the Foreign Minister of Mexico, not of the United States?" I just don't think Kushner had the critical understanding to even know. Yeah, some of our same issues were on the piece of paper so that was good enough for him. And that was where we had the conversation where I said to Kushner, "You know, Videgaray can't always deliver. I think Luis is very, very smart but I don't know that Luis understands the Mexican population very well." I wanted Kushner to understand that Mexico's position might change if Videgaray was wrong about what might get public support. And Kushner just really blew me off, if Luis said it, it must be true. I found that astonishing. I believe in us being allies and partners, but we're two sovereign nations, and we ought to be.

*Was José Antonio Meade<sup>36</sup> their choice?*

---

36 PRI Presidential candidate in the 2018 elections.



To the extent that they even focused on it, yeah. A lot of people knew Meade because he'd had five different government jobs. Even some of the Republicans knew him well and liked him a lot. I think if they had met with Ricardo Anaya<sup>37</sup> they would have liked Anaya too in terms of his policies.

*At the point that AMLO was up in all the polls, did the embassy remain as a simple observer?*

I didn't see anything more active than that.

*Did you meet with AMLO?*

I did meet with AMLO right before I left in April of 2018, which was hard to get because some of the AMLO people were of the opinion that why should he meet with me if I'm leaving. Through a few friends I was able to convince him that I was still going to have some influence, even from the outside. My first meeting with him was in January of 2017. As soon as I got there, in June of 2016, I asked to see the heads of every party, including him. I saw Enrique Ochoa,<sup>38</sup> Anaya and Alejandra Barrales.<sup>39</sup> AMLO hadn't said yes, and finally in January he said yes. It took me that long to get a meeting with him.

*What's your sense of him?*

First of all, I liked him. I like that he's interesting and he listens. I think he has some useful ideas for Mexico in terms of the inequality and the corruption. The problem is he doesn't have any real policy answers. When I asked him on the foreign policy side in January 2017, his answer was literally to ask me, "Haven't you read my book?" Which suggests to me that somebody else wrote those chapters and he doesn't even know what they said otherwise he would have answered. The second meeting was very interesting because it was clear that the message, he wanted to convey to me was, we think the relationship with the United States is our most important relationship in the world and we want it to go well. Which is very positive, but he had no answers on migration or security or how he wanted the relationship to be better or his domestic questions including things we had to work on together. He was very vague on those things, so it was difficult.

---

37 PAN Presidential candidate in the 2018 elections.

38 President of the PRI.

39 President of the PRD.

*Should the U.S. be concerned?*

Some of the people that he seems to admire are not necessarily people that we think are so great. He doesn't admire Nicolás Maduro,<sup>40</sup> but he's not going to take a leadership role on Venezuela either. He's always talking about his good friend Jeremy Corbyn.<sup>41</sup> I don't think Jeremy Corbyn is so great. But do I think that AMLO is somehow Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela dangerous, no. But we'll have to see. My concern, and what I told Washington, was whether he really was a small-d democrat. He's not an institutionalist. He believes he can do everything and that strengthening the institutions of government could be an impediment. It's why he hadn't even committed to an independent attorney general under the anti-corruption system. That's where I think we should be a little worried.

*How was the transition from Obama to Trump?*

When they took over, for a long time there was no contact at all. Tillerson really seemed to have no interest in ambassadors. He didn't reach out to them; he didn't seem to want their counsel. He didn't ask for a cable with our perspective on what the state of play is. The bureaus were putting together transition books but we were not asked for anything. However, because I'd been through so many transitions, I did what some people didn't. We sent things in even though we weren't asked. Here's where we are with the Mexicans, here's where we think you should go, here's some things you might think about. There didn't seem to be anybody who knew anything about Mexico but they never asked for it. But this transition was obviously unlike anything I've ever experienced.

*When did you decide you had enough?*

There was not a month that went by in the 15 months I worked with the Trump Administration, that I didn't think, "Oh my God I really should leave." And so, by the time I actually talked to Tillerson about departing, and I said I was going to depart in April, he asked me to stay a little longer. It had been weighing on me for a long time and frankly it was sort of agonizing because I was doing a lot of good stuff, positive things, but then everything coming out of Washington from the president was negative. I didn't feel like they were listening to us. We weren't allowed to come back to Washington for meetings.

---

40 President of Venezuela, 2013–

41 Leader of the Labor Party and Leader of the Opposition in the U.K., 2015 to 2020.

I was trying to figure out when was the right time. I thought about it particularly hard over Christmas 2017. That was really when I decided I need to leave. I can't do this any more.

*Did you seek council from your Rabbi?*

Yes, the first thing he told me was not to feel guilty, either about staying or leaving. He said, "Look, you've done a lot of good and people really like you there. For as long as you decide to stay, you're a positive face on this relationship. Don't feel guilty about leaving them either because you have to make your own decisions." So, it was really very helpful.

*Do ambassadors have input over policy-making?*

Ambassadors tend to be more policy implementers than policy developers, but I think you have to have the input of ambassadors in policy development. With Obama, when they had NSC deputy's committee meetings, every single time the U.S. ambassador would be connected to those meetings by video conference to discuss the policy that they were developing or were improving or changing and you were virtually at the table.

*To what extent can close personal relations, like Kushner's and Videgaray's, become substitute for institutional relations?*

Because I'm a bureaucrat I believe in institutional relationships. Remember that Jared Kushner is working on Middle East peace and he's working on many other things. He's not giving full time to Mexico. You have to have both but this is not sustainable long term. We need the institutional relationship too, and that's been allowed to languish.

*Define the role of the U.S. ambassador.*

I see it as what it should be, which is trying to advance the U.S. interests with senior government leaders, advocating on behalf of U.S. businesses when they have issues, and most of all trying to get to know Mexico beyond Mexico City and beyond the government so that you can give Washington or anybody else in the United States a more accurate picture of Mexico. Also taking care of the 2,500 people who work for the U.S. Mission in Mexico. Nine consulates, nine consular agencies; 2,500 people together of Mexicans and Americans. After the earthquake of 2017,<sup>42</sup> I had to take care of my people in Mexico

---

42 Seventy people were killed and more than 6,000 injured by a major earthquake that struck Mexico City in September 2017.

City and it wasn't like until three weeks later that I actually felt it myself, like I cried and I got upset, because for three weeks I had to keep my shit together.

*Why is it important for ambassadors to travel outside Mexico City?*

Their daily role has to be getting out of that bubble, and it's not easy and I didn't do it all the time, but I tried. It's so incredibly important that you go everywhere and that you talk to all kinds of people because otherwise, essentially, you're giving them a partial picture, at best.

*Did your friendly approach toward Mexico made a difference?*

I like to think so. Sometimes there were people who said to me you know, "You go around and you do all this fuzzy upbeat stuff with students and with education and meanwhile the relationship is falling apart." Maybe it was too positive, it was almost unreal. I understood that, "Fiddling while Rome burns." The truth is I was still having the hard conversations internally with Washington, or trying to, and there was just no way I could have that hard conversation in public.

*Why not?*

I don't believe in that. When I was ready to make the criticism public, I resigned. But until that time, I had to do my best to try to highlight what we still had in common, how to build bridges. I'm conservative enough I guess to believe you don't wash that dirty laundry in public until you leave and if you really feel strongly about that you have to quit, which eventually I did.

*Are Mexicans misunderstood in the U.S.?*

Absolutely, and caricatured. Even the positive views of Mexicans are two dimensional. Americans don't really get much deeper than hard working people and good food kind of thing. It's not a complete misunderstanding, it's a partial understanding. Even the positive views, people don't have a full understanding. I feel incredibly grateful for the time I was in Mexico because I learned so much that I could not have known from further away, and people were warm and welcoming.

*How to explain it?*

Part of it is the press in English. The top headline in the U.S. is narco-violence. People think that's happening everywhere. Because you had increases of violence in some of

the tourist areas, that's the kind of thing that really does catch the U.S.' attention, unfortunately. But you don't hear that there's 30 million Americans that go to Mexico every year, the vast, vast majority of who adore it, and go back the next time.

### *Are there other factors?*

I think part of it is the Trump Administration which has made it worse. Rather than trying to convey the complexity of the relationship and that Mexico is an incredibly diverse and vibrant culture, you get an Administration which is trying to convey the worst of the stereotypes, they're all narco or they're all you know.

### *Do you think it will have a long-lasting effect?*

I'm afraid it will, the longer it goes on. The public opinion polls about the United States in Mexico have dropped over 30%. At the beginning of Trump, Mexicans, like many other countries, were able to separate out the government from Americans. But the longer that goes on, the less able Mexicans or other countries can do that. They say, "We know it's not you, it's your president, but he's still your president and you're not getting rid of him." So, I'm afraid it could have a longer-term negative response or it could take longer to get over it. I hope not. There are a lot of Mexicans who think this is what Americans really think, they just don't say it and that's terrible.

### *Why Latin America?*

It started really when I was in college. It was the very beginning of countries going back to democracy, with Peru first. I was studying political science and I wanted to do international relations. I wanted to focus on one part of the world. I had taken high school Spanish and I had a pretty good ear, but I thought I kind of want to do Asia, but if I start taking Chinese or Japanese now by the time I graduate all I'll know how to do is write my name. If I take Latin America, which is really fascinating from a political science standpoint, I can continue with my Spanish and I might get somewhere. The only thing I was doing almost full time was dancing. I've danced since I was four and I was dancing and performing in college and I really was drawn to the rhythms of Latin America and the dance. So, it appealed to me. But it was largely because it was politically so interesting at that period of time. It's so funny everybody always says, "Oh your name is Roberta, it's a Latin name," and that wasn't what my mother was thinking when she gave me the

name. And then I've always believed over the years that Latin America is the most important region to the United States on a daily basis, and so often ignored.

*Anything you would like to add?*

The only thing I would say which I know is really corny and you may not use it is; I had an unbelievable team there. I got incredibly lucky. Law enforcement, the public affairs people, the consular people. So, it was a lot easier. It was much more difficult after Trump won to motivate some of those people.

*Why?*

There was a period of zombiedom when people were walking around a little bit like zombies, then they start to get their groove back and start to realize what they can do, but it was tough on some people.

*Did you lose people?*

We lost Americans and we lost Mexicans. For example, when the Trump Administration proposed a 30% cut in the State Department, we lost some of the Americans because we were worried about their future, especially the diplomatic security guys with security training. They can go to other agencies whose budgets were increasing.

*What did you bring back from Mexico?*

One of the interesting things was that no matter how often you work on Mexico at the State Department, until you live and work there, you get to visit so many different places-- I don't know that I had a good appreciation as I do now for the diversity in Mexico, its geography and demographics. There are so many different Mexicos. I found that fascinating in terms of cuisine and culture and *artesanías*. So, what I brought back was in the first place a more nuanced understanding of Mexico, which I think is helpful. But the second thing is a greater appreciation for Mexicans. I can't even begin to tell you how warm and welcoming everybody was, even in the bad times. I just found Mexicans astonishingly warm and open and giving.

*Was Mexico your most challenging post in a 30-year public service career?*

Yes, but also the most rewarding, because of Mexico and also because the relationship is so incredibly important, so you always like to think that what you're working on is the center of the universe. So, I did.





**CHRISTOPHER LANDAU** was born into a U.S. Foreign Service family in Madrid, Spain, on November 13, 1963. He grew up in Paraguay, Chile, and Venezuela during the 1970s and 1980s while his father, George W. Landau, served as U.S. ambassador there. Landau graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard College in 1985 with a degree in History and a Certificate in Latin American Studies. He then graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard Law School in 1989, and served as a law clerk to Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas on the U.S. Supreme Court. He practiced law in Washington, D.C., for more than thirty years, specializing in appellate litigation. He has briefed and argued cases in the U.S. Supreme Court and all the federal courts of appeals. After returning from Mexico, Landau joined the Ellis George Cipollone law firm in Washington. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute advisory board.

During Landau's 17-month tenure, the second-shortest of any U.S. ambassador to Mexico in more than four decades, the world was hit with an unprecedented pandemic; the USMCA entered into force; López Obrador ordered the release of a prominent cartel member in Culiacán; a Mormon family of dual nationality was massacred in Sonora; Trump offered to send troops to help fight criminal groups; the U.S. Attorney General paid two visits to Mexico; Trump and AMLO met at the White House; the U.S.-Mexico border was closed for nonessential land crossings due to the pandemic; supply chains were disrupted; the flow of undocumented migrants slowed down; and a retired Mexican general was arrested on drug charges in California.





## Christopher Landau

2019-2021

CHRISTOPHER LANDAU arrived in Mexico City in August 2019. After his predecessor announced she would be leaving in early 2018 and a State Department nominee to replace her withdrew his name, Landau—a well-connected member of the Republican Party and an insider in Washington’s legal elite—became the frontrunner. At a meeting in the Oval Office in February 2019, President Donald Trump reportedly offered him the lifetime position of a prestigious judgeship; but, to the president’s surprise, Landau told him he would rather be ambassador to Mexico.

He was nominated on March 20, 2019, confirmed by the Senate on August 1, and sworn in by Justice Clarence Thomas during a ceremony at the State Department attended by Attorney General William Barr and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He presented his diplomatic credentials to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on August 26. As a Trump political appointee, Landau ended his tenure on January 20, 2021, as President Joe Biden was being sworn into office in Washington, cutting short his plan

to stay five years in the position. No other event was more pivotal in his brief tenure than the covid pandemic. With no diplomatic experience other than having been the son of a career ambassador stationed in Latin America, where the young Landau gained fluency in Spanish and became interested in history, Trump's new ambassador to Mexico was in pandemic crisis mode for most of his term. "I had a strange time," he told me.

By the time Landau took up the Mexican post, bilateral tensions over trade and migration had eased significantly. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) had already been negotiated and passed, and Mexico had agreed to reduce the flow of migrants to the southwestern border after Trump threatened to impose tariffs on Mexican goods. Contrary to widely held expectations, Trump and López Obrador, who come from different backgrounds but both do things in unconventional ways, understood each other and got along well. López Obrador knew that migration was Trump's top priority and tried to please him, making Landau's job easier. Trump was said to be impressed with López Obrador's ability to brush off his political opposition and keep his popularity high.<sup>1</sup>

But Landau faced challenges in areas where the Trump and López Obrador Administrations did not see eye-to-eye, particularly on security and counternarcotics. While López Obrador coined the phrase "*abrazos no balazos*" (hugs not bullets) to describe his nonviolence policy toward the drug cartels, Trump pressured the Mexican president to accept help from U.S. troops to fight violent criminal groups inside Mexico.

In an apparent policy shift from previous Mexican presidents, who dealt directly with the American ambassador, a figure often perceived as larger-than-life, López Obrador had little personal contact with Landau. AMLO asked the American envoy to deal with the foreign minister instead. In Washington, Landau's interlocutors were primarily the State Department and government agencies involved with Mexico. The Trump Administration's chaotic handling of foreign policy gave Landau ample room to conduct diplomacy as he saw fit without being micromanaged by Washington.

Landau was instrumental in organizing the first and only Trump-AMLO person-to-person meeting at the White House in the middle of the covid pandemic. Trump and AMLO were eager to celebrate the USMCA taking effect with fanfare. Visiting Washington was

---

1 A U.S. Embassy cable sent to Washington, dated 12/09/2019, signed by Landau and under the subject: "Mexico: One year in, President López Obrador approval Ratings Break records despite challenges," noted that "AMLO's Teflon holds through year one," despite security concerns, corruption and poverty. Declassified by the Department of State under FOIA in 2021.

a breakthrough for AMLO, who promised to travel abroad as president only in extraordinary circumstances. It was his first trip abroad.

Reluctant at first to be active on social media, Landau soon realized Twitter's potential to communicate with a large audience. He became a national sensation in Mexico, growing the ambassador's official Twitter account from about 25,000 followers when he first arrived to 280,000 by the time he left. He pleased average Mexicans by extolling the many beauties of Mexico. He avoided retweeting Trump's famously divisive tweets, keeping his message largely uncontroversial. He visited all 35 Mexican states, meeting governors, businessmen, American residents, and average local people, despite the pandemic, which took up more than half of his time.

I interviewed Landau in December 2021 at his office in downtown Washington, D.C. Surrounded by Mexican artifacts and mementos he had brought back and with a framed proclamation of his nomination signed by Trump on the wall, Landau spoke freely for more than two hours about his Mexican experience, the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, the achievements he's most proud of, and what he believes will be his legacy.



#### *How did your nomination come about?*

I've been involved in politics since I graduated in 1989 from law school to some degree or another and came to Washington. First, I clerked at the Supreme Court. I was federal employee, not involved in politics, but when I left the clerkship, I came to work in private practice in the early 1990s and from that time on, I supported Republican candidates for office. I was pretty plugged into Republicans, primarily on the legal side of things.

#### *Why not a legal position?*

President Trump offered me the position of a judgeship on the D.C. Court of Appeals in Washington that was vacated by now Justice Brett Kavanaugh who went to the Supreme Court. He was very surprised when I said I would rather go to Mexico as ambassador. A judgeship is a very prestigious thing in this country and is a lifetime job. He kind of looked at me and said, "Most lawyers would kill for that job." I remember saying, "Mr. President I think I can do more good for the country and for your adminis-

tration in Mexico.” I really believe that because so much of the Republican foreign policy establishment had essentially committed *hara-kiri* during the Trump campaign by citing, “never Trump;” pledges and were very opposed to Trump. I did not take such a dim view of him. I thought it was important that he have someone in Mexico that he could trust.

*When did you first express interest in the Mexican post?*

Ambassador Jacobson announced that she was leaving the post in May of 2018. It was in the summer of 2018 that I expressed an interest in the job. I thought my background could make me an effective ambassador.

*Over a career person?*

I knew from the beginning that it wouldn't be possible for Trump to have a career ambassador in Mexico given that his approach to Mexico, and to foreign policy in general, was going to be unorthodox, and unorthodox is not something that really works within the State Department bureaucracy.

*Did people you know like Bill Barr, who became attorney general, and Supreme Court Justice Thomas, help you?*

I'm not exactly sure how my resume got to the top of the pile. I think it got into Jared Kushner's hands. He was very influential in Trump's policy towards Mexico, in getting the USCMA over the finish line.

*Did you meet Trump after you were vetted?*

Yes, I went to the White House in February of 2019. By this time, I had been fully vetted for the job. I had already been the presumptive nominee even though I hadn't been nominated. They had decided on me in October of 2018, but that process wasn't completed until January 2019.

*Why the delay in naming an ambassador?*

I think Tillerson had a friend<sup>2</sup> who was going to go as ambassador to Mexico and he asked Mexico for the agrément before Ambassador Jacobson left. Tillerson left and he (Whitacre) didn't want the job anymore so things went back to square one.

---

2 Ed Whitacre, former Chairman and CEO of AT&T, was chosen by Secretary Tillerson for ambassador to Mexico, but the White House never announced his nomination despite the agrément granted by the Mexican government.

*Did Trump discuss with you his priorities in Mexico?*

We talked a little bit about how important Mexico was for his administration, his foreign policy, and his domestic policy. You get a letter and that has all the priorities.

*How was your relationship with him?*

It was a good relationship. I didn't want to go to the White House too much because I figured they have enough problems. If I'd had a big problem I would have gone, but I figured I could try to work things out on my own. That's kind of the ultimate backstop. I wish in retrospect that I had actually gone more.

*Why?*

I had a strange time in Mexico because of the pandemic. My goal had been to come back to Washington every two or three months. I think is very important for an ambassador to talk to people in Washington, my boss, the secretary of state, the attorney general, the secretary of agriculture, the secretary of labor. So many agencies in the American government have an interest in Mexico. But then once the pandemic started nobody really traveled much. That changed everything.

*How often did you speak by phone with Trump?*

I probably spoke to him about five or six times while I was ambassador, every few months.

*Who were your interlocutors in Washington?*

It varied depending on the issue. On migration Stephen Miller<sup>3</sup> was very active in the White House as well as people in the Department of Homeland Security. I talked a lot to Mark Morgan,<sup>4</sup> acting head of the CBP which obviously has a lot of authority on the border. I talked to the acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Chad Wolf.<sup>5</sup> I talked to Bill Barr<sup>6</sup> in the Justice Department. But there was nobody that I would call every week and say this is what's happening.

---

3 Stephen Miller, served as Trump's senior political advisor and lead advocate for his anti-immigrant policies.

4 Mark Morgan, acting Commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, 2019-2021.

5 Wolf served as active Secretary of Homeland Security from 2019 to 2021.

6 William Barr, U.S. Attorney General, 2019-2020.

*Were you ever asked to deliver a special message to the Mexican government?*

If there was a special message the president would send somebody, like he sent the attorney general a couple of times. But just for day-to-day stuff that was more me. I had a very clear sense of our priorities in Mexico.

*Can you describe those priorities?*

There were three main priorities. One, to get the USCMA treaty over the finish line, that had obviously been a controversial topic. The agreement had been signed in November of 2018, before I got there, but it still required ratification so it could still be changed. Then more than that, issues of trade and commerce. Trying to support American companies; there's a lot of controversial economic issue in Mexico particularly the energy sector with President López Obrador and his program. I had to convey our concerns about some of those issues. I generally did that privately with one of the ministers in the government. My second big priority was migration. There had been quite a crisis when President López Obrador came into office in December 2018. He said our Central American brothers and sisters are welcome in Mexico. Caravans started flooding into Mexico, but they didn't stop there, they kept going to the United States. There was a huge problem. In the spring of 2019, just before I got there, that's when we had the threat of tariffs and things were quite tense. All that worked out in June before I arrived.<sup>7</sup> Migration issues were pretty much under control during the time I was there. The third big priority, was security issues particularly counternarcotics. It proved to be a very vexing issue where we had some ups and we had some downs.

*Do you agree with using threats to achieve goals as Trump did?*

It was a very dramatic moment. In May of 2019, while I was sitting at my confirmation hearing in the Senate, the President actually started tweeting about this. Unbeknownst to me. He was very upset. I think he concluded that this was a crisis that the Mexican government created. While I think it was unconventional, that's one of the things about President Trump, he didn't feel bound to just do things the traditional way they've been done. A lot of people didn't like that about him, but I don't think there were any hard feelings when I got there.

---

7 Trump backed off his plan to impose tariffs on all Mexican goods and announced June 7, 2019 via Twitter that the U.S. had reached an agreement with Mexico to reduce the flow of migrants to the southwestern border.

### *Why?*

President López Obrador is kind of like that too. He doesn't always do things in the conventional way. I think he had a level of respect for President Trump and it was mutual. When I presented credentials, President López Obrador made it very clear to me that he wanted to have a good relationship with the United States. I conveyed a message from President Trump that we wanted to have good relationship with Mexico. I didn't really experience any of the residue of that tension. It seems like it reached a point very quickly where it got very tense and then people moved on and there weren't a lot of recriminations.

*Did Trump break with what has long been considered a "política de Estado" (state policy) toward Mexico, meaning Mexico's internal stability trumps all other considerations?*

What changed under President Trump is not so much the underlying strategic interests of a *política de Estado*, but more the tactics he used. It's just his way of getting his goals. I remember that when he issued the tariff threat all of my predecessors wrote a letter<sup>8</sup> saying, "Oh, this is outrageous we've always separated economic issues from migration issues." President Trump said, "Why should that be?" They're correct that traditionally those two things are treated as totally separate, but it's a fair question, why would you treat it separately when you have some leverage over somebody.

### *Was it effective?*

It was effective. You want to use all the tools at your disposal. It's a fair argument whether or not it created some kind of greater bitterness or longer-term problems. It's not as obvious to me that it was something outrageous or outlandish. A lot of times people got very distracted by the fireworks and the language, but what was actually happening was not that different. We faced a real crisis situation at that point with all these caravans. It's important to underscore that the migration issue has been on the agenda with Mexico for a long time, but it has changed quite a bit starting in the Obama Administration with the unaccompanied minors from Central America.

### *What do you mean?*

---

8 "Ex-U.S. ambassadors to Mexico push Trump to 'delink' trade, migration," *Reuters*, June 5 2019.



Christopher Landau and President Donald Trump. *Landau's personal archives.*

Now a big chunk of the migration issue is not Mexican. That is been overshadowed now by third country migration. As we look ahead towards relations for the rest of the century, after you and I are gone from the scene, I suspect that this will be an ongoing challenge for both countries. It's important for both countries to bring some fresh thinking because now we're talking about people flying in from Bangladesh, Congo, Kazakhstan. It's like the United Nations there on the border. To have unregulated flows of people entering the country it's not in Mexico's interest either.

*Did the pandemic affect migration flows?*

The pandemic underscores that's important for countries to have some control over their borders. Most of the countries in the world issued some kind of border restrictions for public health reasons. It's just something that Mexico and the United States are going to have to work together on to discourage the rest of the world as a doormat to enter the United States.

*How was your relationship with AMLO?*

I always had a good relationship with AMLO. I can't say I saw him a lot, but we got along very well. I think he's a very pleasant person. He honestly, I believe, wanted to have good relation with the United States. He had written that book<sup>9</sup> during the campaign. People

---

<sup>9</sup> In his 2017 book *Oye Trump*, López Obrador defended immigrants, rejected the wall and called Trump erratic and arrogant.



were expecting that he would fall into a traditional, populist, anti-American approach, but he went out of his way when I first presented my credentials to say that he believed that history and geography had placed our countries together and that he regarded Mexico and the United States as being on the same team. He's obviously very concerned about Mexico's sovereignty, but, in that sense, he's kind of analogous to President Trump who's very concerned about American sovereignty. I think they're both nationalists for their countries. I don't think that they begrudge each other's interest in putting their own country first.

#### *How often would you meet with AMLO?*

President López Obrador is a pretty hierarchical person. His view was that ambassadors deal with the foreign minister. Whenever I had an issue, I would contact the foreign minister. I had relatively little contact with the president directly. President Trump called him sometime in the first few months of my tenure—maybe it was when Chapito<sup>10</sup> was let go, or maybe it was when the Mormons were killed—<sup>11</sup> he said, “I've sent you an ambassador that I have a lot of confidence in. He's really a very good ambassador.” President López Obrador responded, “Thank you very much, but the ambassadors deal with the foreign minister, not with me.”

#### *Was he interested on foreign policy?*

He told me then that his view is that a good domestic policy is the best foreign policy. Whether that's right or wrong, that was his view. I think that he doesn't see himself as a foreign policy president. I think he wants good relations with the United States because he views that as something that is helpful for him domestically. In a sense, his opposition would like nothing more than to say that he's destroying the relationship with the United States. He made a judgement that it was politically good for him to have good relations with the United States, whoever was in power.

#### *Did you discuss with AMLO his “abrazos no balazos”<sup>12</sup> policy?*

- 
- 10 López Obrador ordered security forces to release Ovidio Guzmán López, one of Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán's sons collectively known as Los Chapitos, after a cartel unleashed mayhem and security forces were outgunned on October 17 2019.
- 11 Nine members of a Mormon community in northern Mexico were killed in an ambush by cartel gunmen on November 4, 2019. The victims were all US-Mexican citizens.
- 12 “Abrazos no balazos” (hugs-not-bullets) is the phrase AMLO coined to describe a non-violent approach of poverty-alleviation programs toward the cartels.

It came up when Attorney General Barr visited Mexico, in December of 2019,<sup>13</sup> and we met with López Obrador. Both sides presented their vision of counternarcotics strategy. I never felt it was my role as the ambassador to tell AMLO what his security strategy should be.

*What should the U.S.' role be in your view?*

The United States is there to try to support whatever programs we think are effective in Mexico, and where they want our support. This is one of the challenges. Mexico has to be in charge of law enforcement and security in Mexico. It's their own sovereign territory. For many years the United States has placed a lot of emphasis on what happens in Mexico from a law enforcement perspective in terms of our own agenda on counter-narcotics. That's a tricky approach. We are better off focusing on what we can control within our own borders. The criminal activities happen here. The drugs don't get from the border magically to our inner cities. I am a big believer that we should not make our counternarcotics strategy dependent on what Mexico is doing because that makes the success of your efforts depend on another country.

*Why did you wait until you were no longer ambassador to say that up to thirty percent of the Mexican territory is controlled by the cartels?<sup>14</sup>*

Yes, I did say that, when I'm somewhat freer to talk. I am certainly concerned as I think anybody should be, Mexicans too, about the level of security and violence in Mexico. Ultimately that's an issue that Mexico has to figure out how to address. Part of the reason that they will always wind up at each other's throats on these issues is because historically the United States has been too involved in what goes on in Mexico.

*How do you explain then Trump's offers to send troops to Mexico?*

It's an offer. It was on a phone call with President López Obrador. I think he said look, if we can help you, you know where to call me. The president did it as a good neighbor, but ultimately President López Obrador said no.

*Did he offer it twice?*

---

13 Readout of U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr's Visit to Mexico. Department of Justice, December 5 2019.

14 "A Roundtable with Ambassador Christopher Landau," YouTube, Council of American Ambassadors, April 21, 2021.

I'm not sure. There was a phone call after they released Chapito. And there was another phone call about three weeks later when the Mormon family was killed. That was a very challenging time when it looked like this kind of violence was spinning out of control.<sup>15</sup> I wouldn't read too much into the offer to send troops. The president was trying to think of helpful things to say. I remember speaking to him and he mentioned to me that he offered to send troops.

*Did he think López Obrador was going to accept his offer?*

I don't know the answer to that.

*Did you listen to those phone conversations?*

Not live. I saw the transcripts later.

*Do you think sending U.S. troops is a good idea?*

I have my own doubts about U.S. attempts to kind of bolster Mexican law enforcement and about a law enforcement strategy generally. The DEA is an agency within the Justice Department and they have a very specific mission which is to catch the criminals and bring them to justice and that's fine. But that is a very small part of the overall attempt to address the drug problem because if you catch these bad guys other bad guys will replace them.

*What do you propose?*

We have to focus much more on structural issues like the demand issue. We have to focus on issues like work with Mexico on controlling the supply, particularly now with fentanyl and the precursor chemicals coming in from China. But you're talking about a sovereign country. Whatever we do we have to do with the permission of Mexican authorities. Maybe Mexico is not confronting some of these issues because it feels the Americans will come and solve their problems.

*Offering troops feeds into that mentality, does it not?*

I agree. Ultimately, I come out on the other side to say that we need to redouble our efforts in the United States.

---

15 According to Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, on at least two occasions in the summer of 2020, Trump asked him about the possibility of launching missiles into Mexico to "destroy the drug labs" and wipe out the cartels. Mark T. Esper, *A Secret Oath, Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times*, (Harper Collings Publishers, 2022), p-312.

*How real was the possibility of designating the Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations?*

It was certainly a possibility. The President talked about that. That was right after the Mormon thing happened. Some people were urging him to do that.

*Did you agree?*

My own sense on that is that The Drug Kingpin Act already provides a lot of substantive solutions. Whatever you could achieve by designating them as terrorists you could already achieve under our drug law. So, it would be more of a symbolic thing.

*How important is the DEA's role in Mexico?*

The DEA keeps focusing on assisting law enforcement in Mexico which is honestly not particularly welcomed; it leads to all kinds of problems. I think President López Obrador thinks that the DEA is doing a lot more than it's actually doing. We've just historically had a lot of problems with American involvement in Mexico. In fact, when the Americans start giving money and supplies to Mexico it comes with a lot of strings and a lot of oversight. It hasn't worked for 30 years and the problem is getting a lot worse.

*Did the Mérida Initiative work?*

It didn't work. In fairness, the Mérida Initiative has evolved a lot over the years. What it was under Calderón is very different than what it is now. When people in Mexico think of the Mérida Initiative, they think of Calderón and the helicopters and military style weapons. It hasn't been like that for ten years. When I was ambassador there wasn't one dollar as far as I'm aware that went to anything like that. They were all programs about improving a new criminal justice system in the states and to get the machines that help with professional law enforcement.

*That's why it was renamed?*

Yes, if people associate Mérida with the helicopters and Calderón, then it's better not to use the name Mérida. It's now going to be called *Bicentenario*. We want to support what Mexico's doing, not necessarily because we're altruists, but because it's in our interest too. It's a common enemy that we have. I do think it should worry all Mexicans as it should all Americans that these criminal organizations are getting very powerful.

*Do the cartels threaten Mexico's stability?*

There is concern in the U.S. government that, like as you said, is a *política de Estado* because that goes to the stability of the Mexican state. We do not want to have a neighbor that has great influence of criminal organizations whether it's nationally or regionally.<sup>16</sup> People can argue over what percent of the country is effectively controlled by the cartels, what that even means. Those are fair things to argue over. We've seen it with García Luna.<sup>17</sup> Their influence has reached up to the highest levels of the federal government according to the accusations made in the criminal indictment. I don't think it is unique to the Trump Administration. People of both parties are concerned about Mexico. I worry that sometimes Mexicans think we don't have to solve these problems because if it gets too bad the United States will fix it. It's very dangerous for people to think that the Americans will come to the rescue because it's a sovereign country.

*To what extent are the cartels challenging Mexico's sovereignty?*

I respect Mexico for its interest in its national sovereignty, but national sovereignty can be challenged in many different ways including by non-state actors in a sense performing quasi-governmental functions in parts of the territory and challenging the state's monopoly on the use of force. It's a big challenge for Mexico.

*What can Mexico do?*

I understand that there's a debate in Mexico, as there should be in any democratic country, over the best strategy of doing this. I think President López Obrador and many Mexicans concluded that the Calderón strategy did not work and that's a fair conclusion for people to reach, but I don't think the United States should say you must have a particular strategy.

*Did the Trump Administration have a worse possible scenario for Mexico?*

There's always. Our military and our government tend to plan for all kinds of scenarios, but essentially, we're looking to work with Mexico, and that's why the attorney general came down. We keep knocking on the door of Mexico to say how can we be helpful.

---

16 Barr wondered if the cartels had become more of a "national security threat" for the U.S. than just a matter of law enforcement. William P. Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another*, (Harper Collings Publishers, 2022), p 367.

17 Genaro García Luna, Secretary of Public Security, 2006-2012. He was indicted on drug related charges in 2019. He's currently awaiting trial in a U.S. prison.

*Did you know ahead of time General Cienfuegos<sup>18</sup> would be arrested?*

Let me back up on this. The day I arrived as ambassador in Mexico I was told that he'd been indicted two days earlier and that there was an arrest warrant for him. I said, "Until I'm fully briefed don't arrest him, have that warrant pulled." They didn't know right then that they could get the warrant pulled in time. They didn't know at that point if he was traveling to the United States immediately, but fortunately he was not. So, I had a chance to talk to a lot of people about this issue. It was of grave concern to me because the Mexican military, both Sedena<sup>19</sup> and Semar,<sup>20</sup> are at the forefront of security and counternarcotics efforts in Mexico. The United States has worked with these organizations so I was very concerned over the effect of arresting General Cienfuegos on our relationship with Sedena. I discovered that people in the Department of Justice had made the decision to indict Cienfuegos without consulting with other parts of the government outside the Justice Department, including the State Department and the Pentagon.

*Did Barr know?<sup>21</sup>*

I don't think he did. Again, even within the Justice Department there were procedures that apparently were not followed. It is very important to have a discussion over whether or not, on balance looking at the interests of the United States government as a whole, it was more important to pursue these charges against General Cienfuegos or whether that would have such a counterproductive effect that it would set back our overall counternarcotics efforts. That's a reasonable discussion to have and it didn't take place. I was very concerned and upset about that, but I had to face the reality of what it was: he had already been indicted by the time I got there.

*The day of the arrest, did you know it was happening?*

I did know. I had been given advance notice that it appeared he was traveling to the United States.

---

18 Retired General Salvador Cienfuegos, a former secretary of defense, was arrested on drug and "money-laundering" charges on October 15, 2020 by U.S. law-enforcement officers in Los Angeles, but was sent back to Mexico under pressure of the Mexican government.

19 Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, Ministry of National Defense.

20 Secretaría de la Marina, Ministry of the Navy.

21 "...The arrest had not gone through the normal process... neither I nor the head of DEA was aware of it beforehand." William P. Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another*, (Harper Collings Publishers, 2022), p 374.

*Did you inform the Mexican government?*

No. As soon as he was arrested, I called the foreign minister and told him.

*What was his reaction?*

He was shocked. Again, not surprisingly.

*Was Ebrard<sup>22</sup> upset?*

Yes, as was I. I knew this was going to be a problem. My frustration is that for the last 30 years we've had several of these kinds of problems where the U.S. and Mexico instead of keeping our focus on the cartels, our common enemies, we always wind up at each other's throats. That benefits the bad guys. That's why we need a new paradigm in terms of how we address these issues because it's not working what we have, what we've been doing.

*What did Ebrard do?*

He told the president and the reaction was extremely negative. Marcelo knew that I knew he was upset. He called me back a few days later. I went to the Foreign Ministry and he explained to me all of the reasons this was terrible.

*Like what?*

That this was no way to treat a partner, the military was very upset, this is undermining the president. I said I will make sure that my government understands this. I called the attorney general and I transmitted these points so that he could weigh that. We, as a government, needed to do the balancing process that should have been done in the beginning of the process.

*Why didn't you inform Mexico about Cienfuegos?*

At that point it was kind of water under the bridge because he'd already been indicted. It was a secret indictment, under seal. There are very strict laws about grand jury secrecy and it's not something that I was free to talk about. I would have put myself in legal danger. I think this was a terrible blunder by the United States.

*Was the indictment cleared by top Justice Department officials?*

---

22 Marcelo Ebrard, Foreign Minister of Mexico, 2018-

It was not. The process was flawed. That's one of the reasons that the attorney general decided to let General Cienfuegos go. He thought that we had not followed our own procedures.

*Did the threat to expel DEA agents influenced Barr's decision?*

Overall, it was clear that this was going to jeopardize our broader counter-narcotics efforts with Mexico going forward, what is more important than to go after one person accused of involvement with a group that didn't even exist anymore. The attorney general concluded it was not more important. The balance weighed in favor of letting Mexico deal with Cienfuegos. We presented all the evidence we had to Mexico and we said look at what he's accused of.

*Mexico let him free.*

Yes, they let him free.

*Was the Cienfuegos episode the tensest during your tenure?*

I'd say that was probably the tensest. It's very tragic. We keep telling Mexico to do more arrests and interdict the supply. Mexico keeps saying, lower the demand, stop sending arms, and do more about the money. Everybody's right, but we seem to be locked in this cycle of recriminations that I was trying to break. Notwithstanding all my efforts, Cienfuegos put us all the way back again. I thought I had moved the ball a little bit, but these are very difficult issues to move the ball.

*Why did Barr visit Mexico twice in less than two months?*

The first visit by Barr was to express concern over the fact that we were not really working very cooperatively at that point. Cooperation was very close under President Calderón, but it got more distant under President Peña Nieto, and it got even more distant still under President López Obrador. Everybody was very concerned including the president after these two events of the Chapito release and then the killings of Mormons. Attorney General Barr stepped up to the plate as the point person in the administration to see whether we couldn't try to improve our security cooperation. There's suspicion that the Americans are so involved in Mexico and that they don't even know what the Americans are doing. The second visit was to talk about more specific things that we could do together, it was a continuation of the first one. Controlling the flow of drugs is not a favor Mexico is doing the United States, it's something important for Mexico to do





Christopher Landau being interviewed in Mexico City. Landau's personal archives.

too to reduce criminal activity within its own borders. These are programs that benefit both countries. We reestablished some of the cooperative relationships particularly DEA and Semar, but once the pandemic started the world changed.

*Did the issue of extraditions come up?*

Yes, Barr expressed concerns that extraditions had almost stopped. The Mexicans took a look at what was going and saw that there were some people that had been waiting to be extradited for several years and got that moving again.<sup>23</sup>

*How did the meeting with AMLO go?*

Barr wanted to express our concern that we were not seeing the cooperation that we had experienced in the past, to understand AMLO's perspective, and to see if we could try and restore those levels of cooperation.

*What do you make of AMLO hugging Chapos's mom?*

I was always confused by that. I didn't understand it.

---

<sup>23</sup> After the meeting, extraditions went from standing still to a total of nearly sixty within a few months. William P. Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2022), p 373.

*And of Chapo's daughter being married by the bishop of Culiacán?*

As a Catholic, I was scandalized and very unhappy with the Bishop of Culiacán who allowed the big wedding. I came very close to tweeting about that, it's probably good that I didn't. As the American ambassador, particularly in Mexico, you have to be very careful not to get sucked into kind of local controversies because there's always a tendency that Mexicans want to suck you into things.

*Did you tell the bishop?*

No, I didn't, but I was tempted to. I wouldn't have said it as ambassador but as a member of the Catholic Church.

*How were you treated by the press?*

There were a few *periodistas* who would report things that were not true, like a meeting that practically ended in a fight between the Mexicans and the Americans. I said that's ridiculous. I generally did not take the bait to get into these little Twitter wars, but sometimes I did, sometimes things would bother me for some reason, I thought something was unfair, or a particular journalist, but on balance it was fair. I was always pretty candid about who I am, the way I view things and I think people appreciate and respect that even if they don't always agree with that.

*Did you discuss with AMLO the negative effect his energy reform can have on investment?*

No, I never discussed it directly with him and it would seem somewhat presumptuous. The natural resources in Mexico belong to Mexico and AMLO believes that very strongly. I understand Mexican sovereignty over these things. He's a student of history and for him the whole Lázaro Cárdenas episode is all very present and important for him. I respect that.

*How can you reconcile that with American energy interests in Mexico?*

The line that I tried to establish is to say Mexico is obviously free to have whatever energy policy want to pursue, but at least with respect to contracts that have already been awarded and things that have been done in the past under one set of rules, Mexico should follow that set of rules. It shouldn't change the rules retroactively. It can change the rules going forward for the future, but certainly Mexico wants to attract investment. There's nothing worse than changing the rules of the game. It's very dangerous. AMLO

had made statements like that he wasn't going to grant new concessions under the energy reform, but he wasn't going to take away the ones that had been granted under the Peña Nieto regime.

*Why do you think he broke his promise?*

AMLO is less interested in the efficiency of the system as in these nationalistic issues. That's a big political issue in Mexico and I didn't want to get the United States government in the middle of a legitimate political debate in a democracy. I think it's a very difficult issue. By the same token, as the ambassador, part of my job is protecting American interests and investments.

*What's your take on AMLO's visit to the White House in 2020?*

It was very challenging to have a visit in the middle of a pandemic. I thought there should be something to mark the fact that the USMCA was signed. It's remarkable when you think about it. In the United States, NAFTA passed our Congress by maybe one or two votes in 1993. This time, the USMCA the renewed agreement, passed with 90 percent of the votes in favor in both the House and Senate. The same was true in Mexico and in Canada, where it was almost unanimous. That's an incredible achievement, particularly given the fact that President Trump campaigned very hard against NAFTA and President López Obrador has never been a big fan of free trade. What these leaders managed to accomplish to keep the relationship going is really the basis for an entirely new dynamic in U.S.-Mexico relations. We're always going to have little hiccups like the Cienfuegos thing that everybody gets very upset about for a little while, but in the big picture of what has really changed over the course of decades, the one thing that has really made a difference has been the free trade agreement.

*Was the visit just a celebration of the USMCA?*

Yes, exactly. I thought it was valuable to do that.

*Was it worth the health risk?*

They both wanted it to happen notwithstanding the pandemic. It was the first and only visit of López Obrador outside the country as president. He was flying commercially and that made it much more complicated because the non-stop flights to Washington had been canceled so he had to change planes. I was terrified that this could become a

super-spreader event. Everybody was tested, but again, even testing foreign leaders is a very sensitive subject.

*Was there any substance?*

I wish there had been a much more substantive agenda. I wish they talked about the whole panoply of bilateral relations, but it was more of “lets celebrate this.” It was important for Trump and López Obrador to meet, that was the first time they met in person. Given that each one of them is so important to the other one, it’s always important for the U.S. and Mexican presidents to meet. There’s something about a face-to-face meeting that is very valuable. So, it was not as good as it would have been under ordinary circumstances but it’s almost a miracle that we had the visit at all.

*How was your relation with Marcelo Ebrard?*

Fine, I always thought he was very professional. I respected him greatly. I think he’s a very smart guy and he respected me. We had a very professional relationship.

*Did the Trump Administration speak to Ebrard about the political crisis in Venezuela, Evo Morales,<sup>24</sup> and regional issues in which Mexico and the U.S. do not see eye to eye?*

We always had very free and frank private discussions with Marcelo about topics of mutual concern and obviously we’re concerned about other countries in the region. We expressed our point of view. Mexico expressed its point of view.

*AMLO declined to congratulate Biden for his election. Did Mexico discuss it with you?*

No, it wasn’t really my call to advise them on how to handle that. They have an ambassador in Washington. They decided how they were going to respond to that. There were some challenges to the election results, it was a very close election. I think AMLO, not surprisingly having lived through the experiences he lived through prior elections in Mexico, particularly in 2006, did not want to do it when a legal process was still in place to challenge the elections. Different leaders of the world made different judgements about what to do.

*Were you asked by the Mexicans about the January 6th attack on The Capitol?*

---

24 Mexico sent a Mexican Air Force jet to pick up Morales after he was forced to resign in November 2019 following weeks of protests over a disputed presidential election. Mexico granted him asylum.

No.

*Did you visit every Mexican state?*

I did, I visited every state notwithstanding the pandemic. I thought it was very important, but when the pandemic struck that changed my job.

*How so?*

I almost had two separate periods as ambassador. One was the first seven months before the pandemic and the second was the next ten months. I actually was ambassador longer during the pandemic than I was before the pandemic which was very frustrating. That presented many very unique challenges that there was no rule book for. Other things there's a history of how to deal with them: immigration, security, economy. All of a sudden, the pandemic started and the first order of business was what we were going to do on our common border. Are we going to keep the border open, are we going to close it? Fortunately, the U.S. and Mexico were very much in sync that we were not going to close the land border to business and commerce, because it's very important for the economies of both countries to keep that going.

*What did you first do when the pandemic was made official?*

I went to the Foreign Ministry. We talked about how the United States and Canada reached an agreement to keep our border open for essential activities, commerce and whatnot, but close it for not essential activities, family visits. That has a much greater impact on the U.S.-Mexico border where it's a much more populated border than the U.S.-Canada border. There's many, many communities that straddle the border and many people on a daily basis cross that line. We obviously had no idea at that time how long were we talking about. The initial mantra was two weeks to flatten the curve. I would have never suspected that the border was going to be closed for a year and a half.

*Did you favor opening it earlier?*

I think it should have been reopened in the summer of 2020, once we had a better sense of how to control things with masks and with other kinds of issues. But more important than that, the pandemic created a new challenge in terms of keeping our supply chains operating.

*Did you anticipate problems with the supply chains?*

One of the things that I don't think I really appreciated until the pandemic, was how integrated our economies really are. They're so many parts that are manufactured on one side of the border and then cross over. So many American companies called me in those early months of the pandemic saying Mexico has shut down the operations of our suppliers of these components and we're going to have to stop working in the United States if we don't get them. It was a very stressful situation. And I think it would have been a disaster for Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico relationship if the word got out that you couldn't rely on your suppliers in Mexico at a time. We're trying to attract business back to North America from Asia, particularly China. I think it would have been the worst.

*Was the "essential industries" exception enough?*

In Mexico, the definition of "essential industries" is extremely narrow, basically medical, food and transportation. So basically, almost no industry was allowed to operate. The government didn't really enforce that, but I thought it was very important that the government recognize that with the auto industry they had to keep those relationships going.

*Is that why you traveled during the pandemic?*

As somebody who was giving this message, it was important for me to tell other people that they should go out, but that I also should go out to visit these factories and see for myself and talk to the *gerentes* and see how they were doing. It started with a visit to the Ford engine company in Chihuahua.

*Did you cover all the states?*

Yes, eventually I visited every state by the time I left. About half of them during the pandemic. I think it's important—kind of looking back—that you're not just ambassador to a small group of people in Mexico City and that the relationship is much broader. There are Americans who live and visit all parts of Mexico, and American businesses are investing in Mexico.

*What did you learn?*

In the last twenty years, as democracy flourishes, some of the states and cities are controlled by different parties, so it's interesting to hear different perspectives. Some people are very much on the López Obrador team, some people not so much. Mexico

is the *Estados Unidos Mexicanos*. It's a healthy thing for a big country to have different centers of power; certain people and certain areas with different interests and political leaning. And I think it's true in Mexico. A constitutional order federalism is one of the great strengths of the United States because we're a big country. The pandemic showed that Mexico couldn't necessarily have one uniform strategy for the entire country. They're different conditions; different cities and states were affected in different ways and at different times.

*Did you meet all the state governors?*

I actually spoke to all of the state governors. That was a very helpful dialogue. The pandemic showed the promise of Mexican federalism.

*Before going to Mexico, you were reluctant to use social media. What made you change?*

The first week I got there, I went out to Xochimilco and I tweeted about it. I got an incredible response; the ambassador's account had about 25,000 followers, it got up to 40,000 almost immediately. I saw the potential for this as a tool of diplomacy.

*What did you do to become so popular?*

I think the account was successful because people knew that I was actually writing those tweets. People can tell right away if you're just tweeting something that your assistants are writing for you; it's much more formal. It's actually amazing when you think an ambassador usually has exposure to a pretty small elite. I'm not saying that Twitter is representative of the country, I'm sure it's not, but it's a much broader group of people. Anybody can comment, a *mesero* in a restaurant or somebody who is a flight attendant up to the president. I found it a fun and a useful tool of diplomacy.

*What about critics who found your extolling of Mexico excessive?*

Look, you always are going to have critics. Some people are going to like it, and some people aren't going to like it. That's fine, but it has to be authentic. I don't think you can fake it.

*Was it your biggest contribution?*

Of all the things that I did, the use of Twitter might have been the most revolutionary, as people look at your book and look at this 100 years later, I think it might be my biggest

contribution. It was the first time people really had sense of the American ambassador. I kind of changed the role of the ambassador.

*I noticed you hardly retweeted Trump. Why?*

Hardly. I didn't think that was the most useful way to angle it. I think you can imagine.

*Did you want to keep away from controversy?*

Yes, people can criticize that and I get it.

*Did you find the anti-Trump sentiment stronger than the pro-Trump sentiment?*

The whole issue of public diplomacy came up during my confirmation hearings. Some of the Democrats said public sentiment in Mexico is very against Trump and what are you going to do? That was one of the things that I had in my mind when I wanted to show that I speak Spanish, know certain things about Mexican history and culture, and I'm interested in learning more about those things and experiencing the country. By the time I got there, people knew that Trump is who he is. Some people liked that and some people didn't like that. I was my own person and it was probably particularly effective in the Trump Administration who had sympathy for Mexico and respect for the country; I thought that was helpful.

*Did the case of Brian Jeffrey Raymond,<sup>25</sup> the serial sexual offender and former CIA employee in the embassy, surprise you?*

Of course, it surprised me. It was horrible. Outrageous. We sent him home immediately as soon as that was discovered. He was criminally charged in the U.S. I was very unhappy about that. I hope that that leads to an investigation on how we're doing background checks into people and the kind of control we have over our own people.

*Was he CIA?*

I'm not sure I can comment on that. I've seen publications like that, let's leave it at that.

*Was he there when you arrived?*

---

25 "FBI Washington Field Office and U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service's Office of Special Investigations Seek Information Regarding Serial Sexual Offender and Former CIA Employee Brian Jeffrey Raymond," U.S. Mission to Mexico, October 25, 2021.



I think so, but I don't know for sure. One of my concerns is that there is a tendency in a diplomatic mission or any government organization to get bigger and bigger. Our mission in Mexico has gotten too big. We have about 3,000 people now, that includes the embassy in Mexico City and the nine consulates general. We have big new buildings everywhere.

*Most are U.S. employees?*

Correct, not all Americans, most of them are local. It's the biggest U.S. diplomatic mission in the world in terms of number of people. But to me that's not a point of pride, that's a point that we should really always be looking at what are we doing there. When you have a lot of people, you can have incidents like this. You have less control over people. I hope that we will always in the future not just think that bigger is better.

*Based on your experience, how would you describe the role of the U.S. ambassador in Mexico?*

The U.S. ambassador in Mexico is a very unique job because the relation is a unique relationship that involves so many domestic political actors and players. It is very important for the ambassador in Mexico to understand that he or she is the one person who can have the vision over the whole relationship. It's very important to have an ambassador who has the ability to go to the White House and say, "this department is not really cooperating." The problem is our government is so big and the White House is the one that can really ultimately discipline people and make sure that the policy is coherent. It is good advice for any ambassador to come back to Washington every two or three months to talk to people, because you have to be a player here in Washington. You can't just be off in Mexico awaiting instructions; you have to know what it is you want to accomplish. To be a good ambassador, you should be involved in the policy discussions in Washington; you shouldn't be passive.

*Were you involved?*

It's useful to have somebody who has the trust of people in the White House and people in the White House know, which means that a lot of times a political ambassador will be more effective. My father was a career born service officer. They go up through the government and they don't necessarily have all the political contacts. Some career ambassadors do, like Ambassador Negroponte, I think is very well connected, but other ones don't. It can be very helpful in Mexico particularly to have a political appointee. I

wanted the job precisely because it's so important to both countries, but particularly to the United States. I don't think we can get control of our own domestic agenda without getting Mexico right.

*What do you consider your biggest achievement?*

The biggest achievement was probably managing the crisis posed by the pandemic and making sure that that didn't cause big disruptions in economic life on both sides of the border, that was probably the biggest single accomplishment, keeping the supply chains going. I was really in the front seat. We kept things on track at a time when a lot of people thought they were going to go off track. I wish there were more that we could have accomplished to deal with some of our countries' challenges, particularly in the security front.

*And your legacy?*

The interactions with people on social media was important. I was probably almost unique in the world among American ambassador in the level of engagement on social media. To some extent my tweets were substantive, but also, they were just about my family, my travels, the food. You have to have a good mix of those things. And one thing that was very valuable was actually using that account for me to understand what Mexicans were concerned about with the United States. Diplomacy has to evolve with technology and in this world, where people are glued to their phone, that was probably a valuable contribution.

*Will you be remembered as Trump's ambassador in Mexico?*

Maybe not because I don't think people immediately associate me with Trump in that sense. We'll see.

*You would have liked to stay longer?*

Yes, yes. It was a very short tenure. It was very intense. I have thought a lot since I've left about the relationship. You don't have a chance to think really big thoughts when you're in the middle of a job. I came to the job having been a lawyer for 30 years. I was generally familiar with the state of play in Mexico, but there are people who give their entire careers to studying the relationship and I was an outsider to that group. It has a certain amount of value to having somebody come in who can think outside the box and think about different ways to approach some of these problems.

*Was Mexico the biggest challenge in your professional life?*

I'd say no. I actually found it a joy, not a challenge in that sense. I'm not a professional diplomat, but I felt very comfortable from day one. I felt like this is the right job for me. I never had a moment when I said, oh my god what am I doing here. No regrets at all. I loved it.

*No regrets in terms of your performance as ambassador?*

No. Obviously, I didn't know the pandemic was coming to happen. I didn't know that I was only going to be there for a year and a half. I thought I was going to have five years. In retrospect I wish we could have done more in the months before the pandemic, but nobody knew that. So, I can't say there were real regrets. I think we did the best we could under the circumstances. Advance the ball during the months before the pandemic and then keep our head above water once the pandemic started.

*Any chance you'll go back as ambassador?*

You never say never in this business. I love Mexico. Everybody knows that. I certainly expect that I will be involved in U.S.-Mexico relations in some way.

*Did you improve the relationship?*

Time will tell. The relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is so vast and involves so many different people that the truth is one particular president, one particular ambassador, doesn't move the needle all that much. You can get a bad president or a bad ambassador and still the relationship keeps a certain equilibrium. I think ultimately that's going to keep us afloat.

*The relationship transcends particular individuals?*

I think it does and so in a sense it's very humbling that I think any particular ambassador probably doesn't have nearly as much power or influence as that person may think. That's actually a very healthy thing because that just shows it's a mature relationship that goes well beyond any person, and it's an institutional relationship.

*Are you optimistic about the future of the relationship?*

In the big scope of things, I'm optimistic about the U.S.-Mexico relationship; again, we will have our ups and downs but I think the most important thing, and USMCA really cements this, is that we're on the same team. Those ties will only deepen in this coming

century and I suspect whoever is the new Dolia of the 22nd century is interviewing whoever is in my shoes in 100 years, I think the relationship will have really deepened and gotten stronger and better.

*Anything else you would like to add?*

No. I think that's a nice note to end it on. It's a great honor for me to serve in Mexico. It was a challenging time.



# U.S. Envoys and Ambassadors to Mexico

1823-2022

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 Mann	<b>1961-1963</b>
Fulton Freeman	<b>1964-1969</b>
Robert Henry McBride	<b>1969-1974</b>
Joseph John Jova	<b>1974-1977</b>
Patrick Joseph Lucey	<b>1977-1979</b>
Julián 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-nomination withdrawn</b>
Jeffrey S. Davidow	<b>1998-2002</b>
Antonio O. Garza	<b>2002-2009</b>
Carlos Pascual	<b>2009-2011</b>
Earl Anthony Wayne	<b>2011-2015</b>
Maria Echaveste	<b>2014-nomination withdrawn</b>
Roberta S. Jacobson	<b>2016-2018</b>
Christopher Landau	<b>2019-2021</b>
Ken Salazar	<b>2021-</b>

*Source: Department of State, Office of the Historian*



## About the Author



**DOLIA ESTÉVEZ** is a senior independent journalist and analyst based in Washington, D.C. She began her career in the late 1980s as the Washington Correspondent for *El Financiero* and *Radio Monitor*. Over three decades, she has been reporting for Mexican and U.S. print and radio outlets, including *Radio Monitor*, *Noticias MVS*, *Poder Magazine*, *Forbes*, *Sin Embargo* and *Proyecto Puente*. She is the author of two Spanish-language books—*El Embajador* (Planeta, 2013) and *Así Nos Ven* (Planeta, 2019). She has spoken about U.S.-Mexican relations and press freedom at public and private venues in Mexico and the United States.







We learn from **Ms. Estévez'** interviews how the U.S. Ambassador can help to advance the relationship even during contentious moments, and the consequences of managing the relationship directly between the White House and Los Pinos or the Palacio Nacional rather than via the ambassador. It is our hope that the lessons shared by the ambassadors, in their own words, will contribute to a greater understanding of this critical bilateral relationship for students, scholars, analysts, and, perhaps especially, for future U.S. ambassadors to Mexico.

*Andrew I. Rudman, Mexico Institute Director*

**Dolia Estévez** is one of the best journalists working today specializing in Mexico, the United States and the "unique and enigmatic" relationship between the two, as she describes it. She has spent a lifetime reporting on both countries and thus has a well-honed understanding of their complexities, their common ground and their misunderstandings. By focusing on a long line of U.S. ambassadors posted to Mexico, she has compiled a valuable study of 45 years of U.S. foreign policy in Mexico, through the eyes of those actors most directly involved. This collection of interviews is an indispensable, illuminating guide of one of the world's most important diplomatic relationships.

*Tracy Wilkinson, Senior Foreign Policy Writer, Los Angeles Times*

Beltway pundits often overlook the pivotal role that Mexico plays in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. In this new edition of her now classic book, **Dolia Estévez** proves them wrong again. Through interviews with the most recent U.S. ambassadors to Mexico, the book showcases not only how one of the U.S. closest allies responded to the chaotic Trump presidency but also how U.S. diplomatic bureaucracy tried to cope with it. A testament to the complexity of U.S.-Mexico relations, the book is an enthralling example of the 'history of the present' genre.

*José Díaz Briseño, Washington Correspondent, Reforma*

A fascinating lens into the history of U.S.-Mexican relations. **Dolia Estévez** has a deep understanding of the bilateral relationship and its players, and probes difficult issues in her interviews with these ambassadors. Some are surprisingly candid. Interviews with recent ambassadors such as Christopher Landau (2019-2021) draw history very close to the present.


*Kerry A. Dolan, Assistant Managing Editor, Forbes*



Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

[www.wilsoncenter.org](http://www.wilsoncenter.org)


## Mexico Institute

 [www.wilsoncenter.org/mexico](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/mexico)

 [mexico@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:mexico@wilsoncenter.org)

 [facebook.com/MexicoInstitute](https://facebook.com/MexicoInstitute)

 @MexicoInstitute

 202.691.4325