



**Mexico: Past, Present and Future**

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## Mexico: Past, Present and Future

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*Michael Lauderdale*

### **An Early Breakfast**

One morning in the winter of 1986 I drove from my hotel in the Zona Rosa in Mexico City to the offices of the Deputy Secretary of Health, Jose Laguna, for a 7:00 a.m. breakfast. Already the city had begun to hum, but the daily toxic brew of auto exhausts and open home-heating fires had not yet filled the air and one was invigorated by its high altitude crispness. I looped down the Paseo del la Reforma and by the Angel of Independence and turned down a quieter street for my friend's offices. I noticed in the distance the Zocalo and remembered being there in 1968 shortly after abortive student protests against the Mexican government that led to the "Tlatelolco Massacre" as part of the harsh reprisals of then President Diaz Ordaz. Mexican troops and police had opened fire upon the protestors and many were killed but no full accounting of those events was ever concluded. I thought about how long suffering the Mexican people could be and yet there was always the sense of something beneath the calm surface. That was my first visit two decades earlier to the City and I remembered the contradictions of those days and how they remained today.

I slowed my car and found parking near my destination secluded from the cacophony of awakening Mexican traffic. The health offices were in stately governmental buildings much more than a hundred years old with large interior

patios framed by bougainvillea and jacaranda. There were papaya trees with early fruit and the cool air required a jacket but if you put your chair in the sun, it would be comfortable.

The Deputy Secretary was an early riser and liked to get ahead of the day by having working breakfasts, yet he was a delightful and generous host who always provided some history lesson about medicine and health in Mexico as we would meet. I had called him from Austin as I planned this trip specifically to meet with him. Unclear about differences in some of the population data I was gathering from Mexican states and cities, I wanted to go over the figures obtained from the Mexican health ministry (*Salud*), the Mexican census (*INEGI*), and the interior department (*Gobernacion*). I was looking at Ciudad Juarez, the largest Mexican city on the Mexico-U. S. border and just across from El Paso, Texas. The three estimates varied by more than 30 percent in the years I was using.

Dr. Laguna, who was the director of health planning for the Mexican Department of Health (*Salud*), an academic and physician, had taught for many years at the Mexican National University (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*). He had been dean of the medical school during the student activism days of the 60's and 70's and was known as refusing to yield to a student sit-in and being carried in his chair from his office by student protestors. Dr. Laguna was an

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old school academic and scientist who felt that science and teaching were a calling not a vocation. He was revered as representing an institutional quality of a dedicated scientist, educator, and physician. A generation or more beyond many of the faculty and staff of the Health Department and the University, he had the patience of a man who had seen many changes in his country.

With Mexico and the surrounding communities around 30 million people densely squeezed into one of the most populous settings in the world he would recount the beauty of Mexico City in 1939 when he was a student and the population was only a million in the city. He recalled the clear air, the open streets, and the city climate with an elevation of a mile and a half above sea level as a perpetual spring all with the visible twin volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl very unlike the crowded, dirty, and noisy city of today. In those days he said most of the city's residents had been born there while today there was a sense that thousands of rural people descended upon the capital city daily.

As we sat down to rich, dark Chiapas coffee, fresh mango, eggs, chilies and tortillas, I immediately pressed my host with my questions about how to resolve the alternative population figures I had secured from the Mexican government. Moving quickly to my business, I said, "Dr. Laguna, I need these data to be able to make comparisons we have planned with all of the twin cities on the border. To accurately map social forces we need the hard data." (Lauderdale 1986) I explained I was frustrated with my discussions with each of the separate Mexican Federal authorities as none could account for the three sets of very different official estimates of the population. Dr. Laguna sighed as he often felt I took too little time for social niceties always pressing work objectives and said to me, "Miguel, you will never find the real population of any Mexican city by looking at the official statistics. There is plenty of time. Let's enjoy the morning."

I shook my head, returned to his statement of the official statistics, and responded that that could not be! I asked, "How can you run a modern country if you cannot trust the official statistics! It's like flying an airplane without instruments." Dr. Laguna replied, "No, it is not hopeless. This is just Mexico. We do it differently here." He paused taking a long drink of the coffee and finally said, "You have to ask your cousin." By now my frustration was evident. I shook my head and said, "How can I do that? I have no family in Mexico!" It was Dr. Laguna's time to shake his head. He said, "You Americans are too influenced by the English and the Germans; too much raw empiricism! Truth does not always reside in physical facts and you can spend far too much time in compiling such."

He paused for several moments and then said, "In Mexico we look to our family for truths." I said, "Then where does that leave me? Where does it leave anyone not from Mexico trying to understand or work with Mexico?" Dr. Laguna replied, "Mexico is different. We are realistic about our official government rules. There are ways. Mexicans are generous and will make you part of a family, a *compadrazgo*. *Confianza* is Mexico. We bargain with data but to find the truth you have to find a cousin there and ask the cousin. That is how Mexico works."

My exchange with my Mexican colleague and friend early that winter morning has been repeated many times in many similar ways in meetings with Mexican associates over the years. The most frank discussions were at early morning meetings or late in the day or especially in the homes of my colleagues in Mexico City or Juarez or Guadalajara. It seems to mean that even the highest authorities in Mexico do not fully trust aspects of the government. Or perhaps Mexican authorities may be more candid about bureaucratic reality than Americans.

How did this very different perception between Mexicans and Americans come into being? What role do history and culture play?

Mexicans do not view the world as Americans do. Every culture creates to some extent its own world view. For Mexicans the world view is one that in the context of the family including the extension of family ties to close friends is where one finds constancy, security, and the truth (Kemper 1982). This separation of the external world from kin is relatively less true for most Americans.

For the Mexican there are always two worlds. One is the world of the family, where there is support and familiarity. The Mexicans use the term *confianza* to refer to the well-knit kin and friendship system that protects the individual. The other is the external world where one must venture but be wary. You must navigate the external world of business, government, and other organizations carefully but you only know truth through those close to you. (Lewis 1959; Lewis 1963; Madsen 1964; Riding 1988; Krauze 1990)

This is an important cultural and psychological concept and one that causes much misunderstanding between Mexicans and Americans. Part of understanding this caution by Mexicans about the non-family part of one's world and the challenges it poses for Mexico and the United States can be understood through an examination of Mexican as well as American history. Official agreements and casual meetings with the people of Mexico always carry some part of the thread of this dualism most eloquently presented by their Nobel Laureate, Octavio Paz (Paz 1950; Paz 1985) and the straight-forward and matter-of-fact practicality of the Anglo may miss the critical nuance of the Mexican. Paz expressed the dualism in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* through seeing Mexicans as if wearing masks of solitude hiding both unresolved indigenous pre-Columbian and Spanish identities.

In contrast to Mexicans, Americans have more of a sense of pragmatism and work toward an immediate future they feel they can control. This is a fairly singular cultural attribute noted at least as early as 1826 by a French writer, (Tocqueville

1835 and 2000) in his travelogue through the new and world's first democratic nation, extended as manifest destiny to support westward expansion by the Jacksonian Democrats and extolled a generation later as American exceptionalism by many, including Frederick W. Turner (Turner 1984). Mexicans, in contrast, are mindful of a longer conflicted history and one that is often remembered with pain. Paz and others he influenced reflect on the role of the past in configuring the Mexican's view of the present. These chroniclers of the culture of Mexico emphasized the unresolved tension between the Indian and Spanish world views.

These two significantly different world views of the United States and Mexico explain much of what each country is today, some of the prospects of the future, and the complexity in crafting agreements between the two countries and cultures. Persons concerned with trade in Mexico, law enforcement authorities' efforts to work with Mexican counterparts, and even travel in Mexico demand some understanding of the very different world views of Americans and Mexicans. For the Mexican the past is always prologue to the present and the future. To understand today in Mexico, the border with Mexico, and the orientations of people in the United States from Mexico, Mexican history provides unique clues. (New Cambridge Modern History 1962; Díaz del Castillo and Cohen 1963; Fehrenbach 1979; Lauderdale, et al. 1970 Meyer, Sherman et al. 2003)

### **Mexico and the United States**

Mexico is a far more ancient land in terms of people and culture than the United States. While the earliest people populated Alaska, Canada, and then the contiguous 48 states before what is now Mexico, some of the grandest cultures of the Americas flourished in Mexico from the central highlands of Mexico City into the tropical regions of the south and east to the Gulf more than a thousand years before Columbus. Mexico has many historical similarities to the United States



and is twined with both of its North American neighbors and yet is very separate (Díaz del Castillo and Cohen 1963; Fehrenbach 1973; Fuentes 1997). It is more ancient in the extent to which cultures of antiquity still play a significant role in Mexican society and culture today.

The geography itself of the two countries has significance for the contemporary cultures and economies. The geography of Mexico was more difficult to traverse in the 1500's to 1900's with vast deserts, tropical forests, and high mountains. This geographical separation and identity served to preserve local cultures and resist the national homogenization of identity that occurred more fully in the United States.

Mexico, like the United States, was populated with complex cultures hundreds of years prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From the first contact and through the next two centuries, war and disease eliminated large percentages of the indigenous populations in both the United States and Mexico and elsewhere in the Americas

(Farb 1968; Thornton April 1997). Disease, even more than war, destroyed the existing Indian cultures and population. Additionally, the United States through mechanisms like the Indian Removal Act of President Andrew Jackson in 1830 forcibly marched many of the American Indian, or Native Americans as is the current popular designation, remnants and placed them on reservations in Oklahoma, New Mexico, and the Dakotas that resulted in small indigenous populations isolated from the swelling ranks of immigrants from Europe, Africa, and Asia with less significant impact on the development of culture in the United States. Far more than Mexico through the way communities were populated, through public schools, the unions, and the military a unique American identity was forged. There was a different process in Mexico.

While war and disease severely reduced the Indian populations of Mexico, the extent was far less than in the United States. There are some detailed reasons for the greater continuity of the

indigenous populations and cultures in Mexico. One was the fact that most of the immigration to Mexico as compared to the United States consisted of men, alone, from Spain and Portugal that were soldiers of fortune rather than families coming to establish farms, businesses and communities. These men saw the new world as a source of mineral riches, especially gold, and intended to return to Spain and Portugal after discovering wealth and lead lives of leisure. This reality and the fact in the Aztec conquest Spanish soldiers responded to far superior numbers of Aztecs by building alliances with other Indian tribes that were suppressed by the Aztecs made the participation of the existing population and cultures with the European conquerors more significant in Mexico.

This set a path for Mexico where its population and cultures had a significant degree of collaboration with the conquerors and maintained more of the Indian population and cultures in the surviving peoples. The Conquistador alliances meant greater communication with the Indians and this resulted in both marriages and alliances with Indian women that began the creation of mixed families between European males and Indian females.

Such relationships were symbolized in cultural fact and myth by the sexual and political alliance between the Spanish Conquistador, Cortez, and one of the favored young women of the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II. This woman, Malinque, was said to be involved as Cortez's concubine and assisted Cortez in the overthrow of her emperor. Thus in one of the founding myths of the Mexican state, there is the issue of the exploitation by the state, first by the Aztec and then Spanish, of the indigenous populations and the willingness of one woman to be a traitor to her people and collaborate with the conqueror.

Myths and Indian population numbers in Mexico are significantly different from American founding myths and original indigenous populations. To a far greater degree the indigenous

populations of the United States were eliminated through war, starvation, removal, and disease. Indian names of places and rivers, Mississippi (Ojibwa-*Great River*), Chicago (Algonquian or Potawatomi-*stinking onion field*), Oklahoma (Choctaw-*Red People*) are many but few of the descendants are left in the American population.

The American experience, far more than Mexico's, is one of immigrants from many lands coming to the nation and being socialized into American culture. The Mexican experience is one of conquerors, fewer in number coming and gaining control, but being absorbed by the population and cultures. For the Mexican, the state is imposed from the outside and remains alien, but the family is near and trusted. This reality underlies the tenuous hold that the state has on the Mexican. The bargaining with representatives of the state such as the "mordida" one pays when stopped by a law officer, the need to have a "cousin" to find the real story as Jose Laguna so artfully explained to me that winter's day in Mexico City and, lastly and critically, the vulnerability the state has during times of economic crisis are deeply important in understanding Mexico today.

### **Ancient Mexico**

Mexico at Cortez's arrival was dominated by one culture in the highlands of Mexico City, the Aztecs. They are thought to have immigrated during a great drought from areas today that are near the Four Corners Region of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado to Mexico City about 1100 A. D. Yet they were only the latest immigrants to these lands. They were influenced by existing cultures most likely the Totecs. Even then, far older cultures had come and gone in Mexico including the Olmecs, the Mixtecs, and the Mayas. Olmecs and Mixtecs had populated the central highlands of Mexico City for hundreds of years prior to the Aztecs while the Maya homeland was along the Gulf including what today are the Yucatan, Belize and Guatemala apparently reaching its peak 500 years before the Az-

tec. Throughout Mexico then and even somewhat today there were dozens of other cultures varying in populations from a few hundred to several thousands and reaching back in time hundreds of years.

Somewhere around 1000 BC, the first of Mexico's ancient civilizations, the Olmecs, established themselves in what are now the states of Veracruz and Tabasco. (Coe 1980; Fisher 1988) They worshipped a jaguar God, built cities, constructed massive stone head carvings, and spread throughout central and southern Mexico until their civilization mysteriously vanished around 400 BC. The anthropological record is not clear on whether they left the region or were absorbed or defeated by other civilizations. Though the Olmecs left behind relatively few artifacts, their influence on later cultures was profound. In their wake came the Teotihuacan, the Zapotecs, and Mixtecs of Oaxaca, the Maya of Yucatan, and, in the most southerly regions of Mexico, the Toltecs, Aztecs, and dozens of smaller groups. These cultures devoted energies, resources, and lives to balance the spiritual and earthly realms. To appease their pantheons of gods, many of these civilizations practiced human sacrifice, a fact that often overshadows their great achievements in the realms of mathematics, astronomy, architecture, farming, textile weaving, art, and pottery (Fisher 1988). The Maya, for example, were so advanced in mathematics and astronomy that their calendar was the world's most accurate until this century. They could predict solar and lunar eclipses, had complex writings, and farmed extensive areas from today's Yucatan into Belize and Guatemala.

None of Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations is more storied or more central to much of modern Mexico than the Aztecs. Though other civilizations in Mexico achieved equal artistic and greater scientific feats, none advanced as quickly or ruled as much territory. Prior to the 15th century, the Aztecs were a marginal tribe living on the edge of Lake Texcoco, the site of present day

Mexico City. By 1473, after subjugating neighboring tribes, they ruled the largest empire Mexico had ever seen. Their capital of Tenochtitlan, set on man-made islands in the lake of Mexico, was a picturesque city of pyramids, mile-long floating roads, aqueducts, vibrant marketplaces, and one hundred thousand residents. Aztec military and trade routes dominated from the tropics several hundred miles to the south to city-like dwellings north to the Rio Grande in today's Texas and New Mexico.

The lake was a source of food, including reed islands that were built to support farming. It also served as a mote to protect the city. Leading a highly codified government was an all-powerful emperor who exacted taxes from the conquered and distributed land to his people, especially the warriors. When the Spanish adventurer Hernan Cortez arrived in 1519, the rich city met his expectations for conquest and wealth. (de Sahagun 1950-1981; Díaz del Castillo and Cohen 1963; Fehrenbach 1979; Cortés 1986; Díaz del Castillo 1986)

### **Conquest of the Aztecs**

The conquest of the Aztecs and the creation of New Spain, a great and tragic history, begins in April of 1519 when Cortez lands in Veracruz on the Gulf Coast, about 200 miles east from the Aztec capital in the central highlands. Only about 30 years earlier, the Spanish adventurer, Columbus, had discovered the New World and many soldiers of fortune began to sail to this world to seek riches. Stories of a civilization of gold had reached the Caribbean years before and then entranced the newly arrived Spaniards. Cortez was but one adventurer coming from Spain. Coronado and Ponce de Leon prowled the upper Gulf Coast in search of riches, and Pizarro scorched a path to Peru destroying everything in his path for treasures of gold and silver.

Cortez on the eastern Mexican coast had a singular mission: defeat the Aztecs and take their gold. To do so, he had less than 400 soldiers, 16

horses, 14 pieces of artillery, 11 ships, guns, and ammunition. His first act upon landing was to burn all but one of his ships so that there could be no retreat. His goals and that of his men were to conquer for gold and then return to Spain to enjoy lives of privilege and leisure. That he was able to defeat an empire of many thousands with just a few hundred men seems nothing short of miraculous, but some of his success can be attributed simply to luck and exploitation of existing myth.

The first lucky break came from an Aztec myth of Quetzacuatl, a light-skinned man -- their most important god -- who had long ago traveled to the east, but was said would one day return. When the Aztec ruler, Moctezuma II, heard stories of the white men landing from great ships on the east coast and then when he saw Cortez and his light-skinned men upon their arrival in Tenochtitlan, he believed them to be emissaries of the great Quetzacuatl himself. Wearing armor that glistened in the sunlight and riding horses, which at that time were unknown to the Indians, they did, indeed, seem some sort of gods. The opportunistic Cortez did not attempt to correct Moctezuma and this is where the myth of Malinche appears. She was thought to have been one of the favored of Moctezuma and knew the Aztec court and Moctezuma well. She advised Cortez that Moctezuma thought Cortez came from this most powerful god and he could use that advantage by playing on Moctezuma's desire to seek favor from Quetzacuatl. Cortez seized on the information and subsequently returned the emperor's hospitality on meeting the Spaniard by taking Quetzacuatl hostage.

The next stroke of luck came when the compliant Moctezuma ordered his people to stand down against Cortez's men and their Indian allies, and by the time the Aztecs began to resist, Cortez had already brought in reinforcements from the coast. The Aztecs finally disowned their cowed, captive emperor, who died a prisoner in his own palace. When the Aztecs laid siege to the palace that Cortez had seized, Cortez and his men

slipped away in the middle of the night and ran for the coast. On the way, over half his force was killed by the pursuing army but Cortez's luck held, and he with the survivors returned with thousands of Indian allies to conquer the city a year later.

When Spain arrived in the Valley of Mexico, it found one dominant culture, the Aztecs, and numerous subjugated Indian cultures. After a hundred years of war and conquest primarily directed toward the Aztecs, Spain turned to efforts to convert the indigenous people to Roman Catholicism and settling them into farming communities. By then most of the Aztec temples had been razed, their warriors killed, and the very stones from their greatest temple used to build Mexico City's first great Roman Catholic cathedral. What gold and other precious metals and gems existed had been shipped to Spain and Portugal, and the Spanish Crown and the Church now sought other means of bringing riches back.

The Aztec empire was gone but the Indians, though in greatly diminished numbers, remained. Like England, France, and the Netherlands, colonial lands could now be seen as agricultural areas that could be either populated by Europeans or conversion of the locals to farmers that would help build national mercantilist empires in Europe.

### **Conversion to a Colony**

For Mexico, the State and the Church became the vehicles to convert the remaining indigenous people into agricultural workers to contribute produce and taxes to the Spanish empire. With State protection the Church established missions across Mexico and into what is today Texas, New Mexico, and California. Missions reached as far north as San Antonio in Texas, Santa Fe in New Mexico, and San Francisco in California; however, the Indians resisted conversion to Catholicism.

Each of the hundreds of Indian cultures had strong religions, often a pantheon of gods, and



integration of the religious beliefs into the social organization, which influenced tribal and city political leadership and set roles for women and men. Often women played more significant roles than men in the continuity of the religious beliefs through their responsibilities of raising the children and maintaining the home. The new religion proffered by the conquering Spanish with its male priests was not compelling to the Indians.

However, Indian conversion was significantly accelerated with the reports in 1531 of a Nahuatl-speaking young Indian woman appearing in a vision to an Indian girl and calling for a mission to be built. The Church explained this as a heavenly sign calling Indians to the Church. The appearance of this woman, known as the Virgin of Guadalupe, is a second founding myth of the modern Mexican state. It served to announce that God had sent a message through the image of an Indian woman to call all Indians to the Holy Church. The message would be used to counter the racialism that has always existed in the society between those of European bloodlines and the Indian. It additionally served to make the Roman Catholic Church a special institution for any people of Mexico with Indian blood. A form of the Church developed that was both the Catholicism brought from Spain and many of the beliefs and practices of the various Indian cultures.

Part of the mission role in the culture was to establish trade and banking. The banking was often conducted by Portuguese settlers who purchased franchises from the Church and who would provide loans to the Indians and increasingly the mixed Indian and Spanish population. Some of these settlers were Sephardic Jews, skilled in trade and banking and beginning to flee the Spanish Catholic Church's cruel and ruinous Inquisition. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Church forbade the collection of interest on loaned money and the franchise arrangement with these settlers provided that economic function and revenue to the Church. This arrangement of the Church, merchants, and the Crown explains much of the wari-

ness and even the deep antipathy of today's Mexican toward the Roman Catholic Church. This feeling is vividly expressed in the murals of Oroscoco and Rivera, in violent protests against the Church, and in seizures of church lands. It was not until 1992, during the administration of Salinas, that many of the strictures in Mexico against wearing clerical garb and Church ownership of land were eased.

By the eighteenth century Mexico was firmly established as a colony of Spain with a far-flung missionary structure, a complex population of pre-existing Indian cultures, and a rapidly growing population of mixed bloods that later would be referred to as *mestizos* (the mixed ones). Mexico, with its fertile plains and great mineral wealth, was the crown jewel of Spain's colonies (Frye 1996). It was heavily taxed, ruled directly from Spain, and permitted no autonomy. The Spanish monarchs distributed land to Spanish settlers in the form of *encomiendas*. These were the predecessors to the hacienda, also known as Spanish land grants, which included the Indian residents as part of the property.

These properties were worked by Indian slaves whom the settlers were charged to protect and convert to Christianity. A caste system developed: there were *Espanoles* (Spaniards born in Spain), *criollos* (Mexican-born, but with Spanish blood), *mestizos* (Spanish and Indian), and finally the *indigenes* (the Indians). It was the Indian slave class that worked the fields, did the heavy-stoop agricultural, road building, and land-clearing chores. Because of their forced dependence on the hacienda owners, and without resistance to European ailments, the Indians were riddled with debt and disease long after Spain abolished slavery in 1548.

Like the United States, the deaths of the indigenous Indians due to war, disease, and starvation were stark. For both countries some estimates are that in a hundred years the original populations were reduced to a tenth of their original number. But, in Mexico, unlike in the United

States, the remaining Indian populations served to create the basis of the modern Mexican population. Unlike in the United States where most of the population today originated via immigrants from other countries, most of the Mexican population traces much of its history and blood to the original indigenous peoples. Indeed Mexico is somewhat unique in the Americas with the high percentage of the total population having Indian blood, including the wealthiest and most powerful of the society. Contrast this to Canada and the United States where the indigenous populations were almost completely eliminated to some countries in the Americas where the remnant indigenous populations continue to live in remote areas with dominant control by highly European-oriented elites.

### Revolution

For most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Mexico was beset by revolutions attempting to reconcile the colonial ambitions of Spain and France and the tensions in regions of Mexico as the colonial powers sought to subdue existing cultures and convert them to plantation-type agriculture. The conflicts included the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to convert the Indians and competing loyalties to Europe and the growing population born in Mexico but of Spanish and *mestizo* origins. While the country's southern border was relatively quiet, the north faced first predatory activity of Indian tribes and then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the intentions of Anglo populations for local self governance and ultimately wars with Texas and then the United States. In 1810, a Catholic priest, Hidalgo, angered by the exploitation of the *criollo*, *mestizo* and *indigenes* populations, agitated for independence. He is remembered for his cry for independence, the "Grito." This became the Mexican War for Independence, which did not succeed until ten years later when Spain granted independence after having reacquired Mexico from France during the Napoleonic wars.

Forty years later Mexico was involved in an-

other war with a European power, as France sought to impose colonial rule after Mexico failed to pay debts on French and other European loans. Also involved in those tensions were a series of wars and border conflicts with the United States. Of particular note are the Texas war for independence in 1835-1836, the Mexican-American War in 1848, and the Gadsden Purchase in 1854. These three together resulted in Mexico losing much of its northern area, almost half of the country which now forms the states of the American southwest and west.

A constant theme in Mexican public social science education is fear of the "colossus of the north"- the United States- and a concern that Mexico will lose more of itself to its powerful northern neighbor. Those fears resulted in many efforts to secure the north to the central government in Mexico City. Transportation and communication networks radiated out of central Mexico and east-west patterns were discouraged. Governors and mayors of all states and especially the north were chosen for loyalty to Mexico City and often lived most of their lives in Mexico City with only the period of being a governor to live in the outlying states. A program of food subsidy and government encouragement of large families during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to populate the land with Mexicans was created to thwart territorial expansionistic aims of the United States.

### The Independent North

The historical reality of the original northern territories of Mexico is less a part of Mexico than some would argue. The Aztecs, the Spanish, and the Mexican governments readily brought under control the central highlands around Mexico City, the lowlands to the east to the Gulf of Mexico, and the area west to the Pacific. The northern realms as well as the south strongly resisted Mexico City's political, religious, and economic control. Vast deserts, sparsely settled, isolated populations, and difficult mountain ranges and great distances made control north of Guadalajara,

Leon, and San Luis Potosi problematic. San Antonio, Texas, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and San Francisco, California, were each so distant from Mexico City that reaching these settlements required an arduous journey by horse and wagon that took between one and two years. Trails were not well marked; water and food had to be carried for long distances as forage and supplies were not available. Further, hostile populations were ready to raid traveling parties.

The Indian populations resisted both Spanish and Mexican control, and repeated uprisings occurred in California, Arizona, and New Mexico as well as in many of the Mexican states. The most complete resistance was exercised by a tribe in the southern plains that simply stopped the advance from Mexico City. At the time of Columbus, the Comanche, (Wallace 1952) an offshoot of the Shoshone, were migrating as a weak and poverty-stricken band of hunters and gatherers from Montana to the southern plains. They encountered and avoided the powerful and numerous Sioux, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Wichita, and Apache (Smith 1996; Trigger and Washburn 1996). To the east were the Caddo, a formidable southern agricultural culture. Somewhere in the late 1500's these Indians began seeing Spanish soldiers on horseback. They secured strays and stole horses from the Spanish and the Mexicans, and quickly became the first American tribe to fully use the horse. In fact, they were the conduit of the horse to other Indian tribes on the Great Plains as well as a source of horses in trade with Mexicans and Anglos. By the time Anglos began to appear in the Southwest in the early 1800's the Comanche were a powerful and wealthy people numbering in the tens of thousands.

By the time of the American Revolution, the Comanche had blocked both Spanish and later Mexican expansion into lands north of Monterrey and west to El Paso. Developing into brilliant horsemen, able to fire from a moving horse, they became the same sort of mobile force as two hundred years earlier had the Mongols in Asia, able

to pin down and destroy soldiers on foot and hold Mexican ranches and Roman Catholic missions hostage. Their raids isolated Mexican villages, with activity extending as far south as Saltillo, Coahuila, about 300 miles from San Antonio, Texas. They effectively cut the Catholic missions, citizens with land grants and military garrisons in San Antonio, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, from Mexican control. The Comanches were the reason that the Spanish and then the Mexican state could never secure Texas, and thus opened the path for Anglo migration into the area. Without the Comanche, Texas would still be Mexico. (Wallace and Hoebel 1952; Hagan 1993; Neeley 1995; Fuentes 1996; Noyes 1999; Fehrenbach 2003)

#### **Mexico's Last Great Revolution**

This 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution in Mexico, a long and bloody war, started in 1910. It resulted in a single party, the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI), which controlled the nation for almost the remainder of the century. The revolution was largely a reaction to the 40 year dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. Diaz had come to power via a military coup which overthrew the elected president, Benito Juarez, a common man and the only full-blooded Indian to be president. In the years of this dictatorship the repressive regime sold off much of Mexico to foreigners, leaving landless peasants across Mexico. By the end of the Diaz regime, 3,000 families owned half of the land in Mexico. With a great concentration of wealth there was widespread poverty among the 13 million, with almost half being Indians.

As in the past the revolutionaries came from the south and the north, not Mexico City or central Mexico. Part of the 1910 Revolution was to break up the large land holdings of a few families and re-distribute the lands back to the peasants. This included stripping the Catholic Church of its vast land holdings and other wealth. Another part was to extend government involvement in many parts of the culture and economy. This was to

remove foreign ownership that was seen as a vestige of colonial domination that had plagued the country for all the years of its existence. For example, in 1938 Mexico nationalized the oil industry and created PEMEX, a state-owned company that controlled all oil production, refining, distribution, and sales. Telemex controlled telephone communication, and similar government and quasi-governmental monopolies existed in many other areas of the economy. The PRI exercised power from Mexico City into every state, county, and city. Roads, telephone lines, airline routes were all spokes that radiated from the hub in Mexico City to all outlying areas.

Much of the political structure of Mexico has continued since pre-Hispanic times, with central authoritarian regimes extending controls from Mexico City north to the deserts of the southwest to the Gulf to the east, the Pacific to the west, and into the tropical lands of Guatemala and El Salvador. The centralizing pattern from Mexico City always seems to exert itself even if the revolutionaries come from the northern or southern regions. But the certainty of the control is abridged by the distances and the enduring cultural differences in the Mexican population.

During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the power from Mexico City was lubricated by profits from the control of businesses. The control was enhanced sharply in the 1970's by the discovery of one of the world's greatest oil fields, the Cantarell, in the Gulf of Mexico. At the time of its discovery only the Saudi Arabian Ghawar field had larger reserves. Yet with the discovery Mexico knew that it must find ways to absorb the huge population growth that had come from government efforts to encourage large families. Once the government had provided food subsidies to increase the size of the Mexican population, by the 70's the population had grown beyond the resources of subsistence farming in rural Mexico and migrations to urban areas had begun to change the nation from mostly rural to urban. With more than 70 million people in 1970, many

deep in poverty, Mexico sought to transform itself from a culture of largely subsistence farmers to industrialized and urbanized people. It had the goal of becoming much like the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Japan. It was a sufficiently large nation, had great natural resources, and a large potential if somewhat under-educated workforce which could be mobilized to transform the country.

### Industrializing Mexico

One solution to the vast need for semi-skilled jobs appeared with the concept of Mexican assembly factories, the *maquilas* or *maquiladoras*. Mexican entrepreneurs saw that firms located near the US-Mexico border, especially near Texas, using cheap Mexican labor could attract assembly work now done in American plants. Once assembled the products were trucked back north to the States. The assembled goods, not permitted to be sold in Mexico, did not compete with Mexican firms and the labor economies were attractive.

These developments might also solve the endemic poverty of the border cities which depended upon providing low-cost and often shadowy entertainment for visiting Americans. Juarez, for example, as early as the Depression, was a major source of bootleg alcohol for the United States. These border cities were an embarrassment to the elites and emerging middle class of Mexico City. Industrialization was an alternative to bars, restaurants, and bordellos that were seen by many to characterize its northern border cities.

*Maquilas* also served as a social and economic experiment for Mexico and the United States. Leaders in both countries were concerned with developments in the European community where easing trade restrictions and allowing labor mobility between countries promised future economic growth. The *maquilas* would test the integration of Anglo capital and managerial skills with lower cost Mexican labor to create plants that could effectively compete in the emerging

globalization of the world's economy. The *maquila* experiment laid the foundation for NAFTA - the broad set of agreements among Canada, the United States, and Mexico to create a common market in the Americas. This experiment, created by the elites in the three nations, has played out somewhat complexly. Here are two examples.

I was in Mexico City at the UNAM campus in June of 1989 and noticed large crowds of faculty and students in classrooms and lounges watching television reports of the protests of Chinese citizens. When the Chinese army tanks began to seize control of the protestors in Tiananmen Square, applause broke out in the audience and then cheering. I was very puzzled by these emotional expressions. Mexico City elites and particularly UNAM intellectuals were the liberal core of Mexico. I presumed that there would be a sense of identity among Mexican liberals and young Chinese seeking to overthrow the oppression of the Chinese Communist state. In conversations with faculty and senior government bureaucrats during that week, I learned that a very different concern had animated what appeared as contradictory emotions. The Mexican intellectuals were seeing China and its vast labor pool as potential competition-- a threat to Mexican labor in the emerging globalization of labor. Senior economic officials felt Mexico had only a five to ten year window to industrialize its large potential labor resources before the world labor market would be hit by almost a billion new workers. If Mexican plants could be built and a Mexican workforce recruited and trained, then they would have social capital in place to compete against the coming waves of cheap labor from Asia. The Tiananmen Square incident would provide additional years of advantage to the Mexican changes underway!

The second example was my first visit to a new *maquila* at an early assembly plant, Elamex, in Juarez in 1986. The plant assembled floppy disk mechanisms for computers. The product had been produced five years earlier in Minneapolis

with labor costs of about \$25 an hour. Then two years later the factory was moved to the Dallas area with labor costs at \$10 an hour but, now, in Juarez, labor costs were \$3 a day! The plant had two assembly lines and all of the employees were young women. I found that most of the employees had moved from small towns and rural areas and had come to the city to escape lives of poverty, early marriage, and caring for large families. They spoke excitedly of living in the large city, near America, shopping, and buying things like make-up and designer jeans.

Under Mexican law factories have to provide medical care and I met the factory physician, a young woman as well. I understood that part of the hiring procedures was a pregnancy test and the physician was to provide fertility control information and technologies to the employees. Under Mexican federal law pregnant women and those who have babies are entitled to substantial benefits charged back to the employer. From this employer and my experience over the years I know that efforts to avoid hiring pregnant women as well as keeping low levels of employee pregnancies have been controversial issues with the *maquiladora* program.

Substantial social policy plus cultural and religious contradictions were and are involved in the Mexican experiment with factory work. One was the fact that birth control would limit the earlier efforts of the Mexican government to expand the national population. A second contradiction is the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to the means of birth control provided by medical personnel. A third contradiction was disturbing the traditional role of women as remaining in the home or at the farm, not working in settings with other men and women. Substantial conflict and misery may have grown from this contradiction. A fourth contradiction is the long remembered scars of colonialization by foreign powers, and the fact that these *maquilas* were owned by foreign companies and in many instances the factory authorities were foreign nationals.

The promise of the *maquila* experiment was to provide companies, especially American companies, a source of lower labor costs for manufacturing tasks. Never popular in the United States, especially with organized labor, it was explained as an effort that would keep jobs near the United States that otherwise would migrate to other areas with large populations needing jobs and willing to work for even lower wages. This included countries like Egypt and Turkey, and most importantly India and China.

The advantage to Mexico was, first, jobs to help absorb the young and growing population that could no longer be supported by agricultural work or existing Mexican factories. For decades, tourism and guest-worker programs where Mexican workers travel temporarily to work in the United States helped Mexico deal with surplus workers. It was hoped that expanding factories would provide a higher wage to the Mexican labor market, and that it would also build critical skills in manufacturing that would strengthen the Mexican economy.

Creating factory jobs can be capital intensive. Estimates were that it took \$100,000 to \$1,000,000 of capital investment for each job created. The United States or Germany took generations to create such capital investments and thus industrial jobs. Mexico sought to jump start the process and skip so many years by permitting investment and ownership from other countries to assist Mexico in building an industrialized economy. Jobs providing incomes for unemployed and underemployed workers decreased poverty, lessened welfare costs to the government, made the government more secure, provided an external source of capital for industrialization, built critical labor force skills, and developed world markets for Mexican manufactured goods. Soon the *maquiladora* concept spread beyond the border cities to much of Mexico. The *maquilas* today are now part of the larger movement of Mexico, through NAFTA, to integrate into the labor and capital markets of the United States and Canada.

As long as trade barriers fall and economic growth continues the original experiment has great impact on Mexican society.

The *maquilas* produce a variety of products, and the impact on the American automobile industry is an instructive example. Lured by low labor costs, the Big Three have been crucial to an industry that now makes up 3 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product and accounts for a fifth of its exports. The 13 plants run by Ford Motor Co., Chrysler LLC, and General Motors Corp. account for more than 50 percent of Mexico's auto production. Mexico is heavily reliant on exports to the United States. Three-quarters of vehicles produced in the country are exported, 70 percent of them to the U.S., according to the Mexican Auto Industry Association. As U.S. car sales plummeted, Mexican auto exports fell nearly 8 percent in November, and production declined 2.1 percent. Since the 1990s, wages as low as \$1.50 an hour helped lure an average of about \$2 billion per year in foreign investment in the auto industry, which now employs some 500,000 people, directly or indirectly.

The disadvantages of the *maquila* experiment have focused upon the threats to the culture and traditional social organization. A separate disadvantage is that the factories were built in areas with better transportation -- the cities -- and thus worsened problems of inadequate housing, transportation, medical, educational, and retail services. This is true in the border cities but even more so in Mexico City where air pollution and traffic gridlock is a daily fact of life.

### **The Promise of Oil**

*Maquila*-led industrialization was one side of a two-pronged effort to modernize Mexico and break decades of rural poverty and chronic unemployment and underemployment. It grew far beyond initial expectations and served to spur the industrialization process far beyond the original *maquilas* of Juarez-El Paso, the largest twin cities on the border. The second part of the effort was

and is oil.

In the mid-1970's angry shrimp fishermen, led by a Rudesindo Cantarell, confronted the state oil monopoly, Pemex, in Veracruz. They complained about oil oozing out of the sea bed, which ruined their shrimping, and demanded compensation for drilling or piping actions of Pemex. Pemex had no wells in the area and the accidental discovery of oil by the fishermen changed the fortunes of Mexico. The source of the complaint was an unknown giant reservoir of oil that had long seeped some of the underground petroleum to the surface. That reservoir was named after the leader of the fishermen, Cantarell.

Mexico has long relied heavily on Cantarell, the super-giant discovered in 1976, for both domestic consumption and export. In the first decade of the discovery and production, Mexico felt its oil riches would be the equal of the Gulf States of the Middle East. Extravagant plans were made to use the income from the oil to modernize Mexico's infrastructure as well as to address the endemic poverty of about 40 percent of Mexico's citizens. However, the size of the find has proven less than the initial expectations.

In the early years it produced about 1 million barrels a day. Through technology that production was boosted to a peak output in 2003 of 2.1 million barrels per day (65% of total Mexican production). It apparently held near that figure for two years and then began to decline sharply. Today the figure is roughly 900,000 barrels per day. The most troubling aspect is that the decline rate is accelerating, estimated at 2.5% per month currently, or 30% annually. It is expected to stabilize at 500,000 barrels a day in 2012?

#### **No Oil Exports after 2009?**

By the end of 2009, Mexico may no longer be an oil exporter. It will be very difficult to replace the oil revenue that supplies 40% of the Mexican budget. The Mexican government has recently taken the unprecedented step of allowing foreign oil companies to explore for oil in Mexico. In a

country that celebrates the 1938 nationalization of its oil industry as a federal holiday, it is clearly an act of desperation. But promising offshore discoveries in Mexico will likely take decades to bring to production, according to Simmons (Simmons 2008), due to the extreme depths and massive technical challenges of drilling and pumping the oil to the surface.

It may be too little too late to replace the rapidly disappearing Cantarell production. In as little as 12-24 months, the effects may be felt both in Mexico and the United States. Replacing the 1.3 million barrels per day the US now imports from Mexico will not be readily achieved. (As a means of comparison, the United States imports 1.4 million barrels per day from Saudi Arabia and slightly more from Canada.) For Mexico, the problems run much deeper, as it must quickly diversify its economy or face wrenching economic and social dislocations. The adjustment period will likely bring great change and tumult, perhaps across the border as well.

#### **A Crossroads Coming**

Somewhere between 2009 and 2011, the price of energy will head back to its old highs and likely well beyond. Deleveraging and psychological forces can rule the markets for any short-term period. Looking ahead, the fundamentals will prevail, as they always do. As economies around the world are printing money for huge stimulus programs, oil companies are shuttering production. Combined with a 9.1% depletion rate, the imbalances are growing. A crossroads is coming, where demand will re-ignite at some point and supply will have difficulty catching up. There is a liquid fuel crisis that has only been in a brief respite from the bursting of the real estate bubble and the resultant credit deleveraging.

Pemex in October lowered its 2008 output forecast by 3.6 percent to as low as 2.7 million barrels a day after interruptions from hurricanes. It was the third time Pemex reduced its forecast for 2008, after a faster-than-expected decline at

Cantarell. Output fell 33 percent from a year earlier, more than twice as fast as government estimates, to 862,060 barrels a day. Declining pressure in the field has made it more expensive and harder to continue recovering oil. Cantarell accounted for 32% of Pemex's total output, less than half of the 65% it represented at its peak. Oil exports fell 20 percent to 1.511 million barrels a day, according to a chart on Pemex's web site. (Martinez 2008, December 22; Llana 2008, February 26)

### Modern Mexico--Three Regions

Today Mexico is a complex society of 109 million. It is a young population with a median age of 26 years (compared to a U.S. median age of nearly 38) and has for two decades had a sharply decreasing rate of population growth. It is the most populous Spanish speaking country in the world, yet few of the population are of pure Spanish descent but more accurately American Indian with lesser amounts of European ancestors largely from Spain and Portugal. It is one of the few countries of Latin America that is truly dominated by a population with mostly American Indian descent. This reality has long been an issue among Mexicans where it is often apparent that European physical characteristics are preferable to Indian. Yet the ascendancy of those with Indian blood to political power dates back to Benito Juarez, in the 1860's. In Mexico today, the population is about 60% *mestizos*, 30% as indigenous people, the Indian, and most of the remainder as white. The racial and cultural categories, mentioned above, of *Espanoles* (Spaniards born in Spain), *criollos* (Mexican-born, but with Spanish blood), *mestizos* (Spanish and Indian), and finally the *indigenes* (the Indians) are less serviceable today. NAFTA, modern communications, consumerism, and travel have lessened the distinction of *Espanoles* and *criollos* as the *mestizos* are the bulk of the population. However, to varying degrees in the country, prejudice exists against Indian populations and Indian features.

Mexico has one of the strongest economies of the Americas. It is rich in natural resources including oil, several minerals, and productive fisheries on both the Atlantic and Pacific side. The Mexican transportation and communication system is among the most highly developed of Latin American as are its institutions of science, technology, and higher education. However, Mexico has limited arable land for crops such as corn or wheat. Until two decades ago, Mexico was self-sufficient in agriculture but today it imports substantial amounts of grain, chicken, and beef from the United States. Its tropical to semi-tropical climate is ideal for fruit and vegetable production. The viability, however, of mining, and vegetable and fruit production is dependent upon export capacity, particularly to the United States. Reciprocal issues exist in the States. For example, Mexico is Texas' largest customer of its agricultural exports.

As in centuries past geography plays a large role in the activities and outlooks of the Mexican people. Mexico has several very distinct geographical, economic, and cultural regions.

### The Federal District

Mexico City has a population of about 20 million with another 10 million in nearby areas and a regional culture often termed *chilango*. People from other regions of Mexico view the *chilango* as feeling superior, cultured, and shaping the destiny of Mexico. Chilangos will often view persons from other regions of Mexico as provincials. It is not unlike the view that people from the East and West Coasts of the United States have of the heartland, the "fly over country." Mexico City is the traditional seat of power in Mexico dating back more than 600 hundred years (Kemper 2002). Mexico, or at least the denizens of Mexico City, has always exerted efforts toward strong centralization and that continues today, but without the strong single-party rule created in the 1915 revolution which controlled the country until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Mexico City is built on the bed of the lake that originally was the floating city of the Aztecs. Engineering keeps the water that once filled the lake drained as the city setting at about 6,500 above sea level is surrounded by high country -- large volcanoes south of the city and mountains to the north. It is densely populated with some neighborhoods having continuous human settlements for over 700 years. It has 18 boroughs containing larger neighborhoods called *colonias* ranging sharply in wealth with some being simply shanty towns resting on the rubble of the great earthquake of 1985. Only in the last decade has the streaming of rural people from central and south Mexico to Mexico City subsided. The City today accounts for about 20 percent of the gross national product of Mexico and includes the wealthiest ten percent of the Mexico City population. While Mexico's politics are largely conservative, Mexico City's are liberal. Nominally Roman Catholic, religion in Mexico is hedged both by the role of the Church in the exploitation of Indians and the fact that Indian beliefs and practices have produced a Catholicism different from that in much of Europe or the United States.

All regions of Mexico, as its Aztec predecessor, through colonial times in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> century and through the revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have been bound by wealth, power, and political sophistication to Mexico City. This power has been exercised through political control from the selection of governors down to city mayors. Government-owned businesses -- like banking, oil, and communication -- provided positions to those loyal and funds to secure the support of the populace with subsidies to lower the price of foods like flour, beans, and masa for tortillas.

As my friend at the early breakfast explained, Mexico is always two worlds, and often no official is assured full knowledge of the official world. Kin and informal networks are critical to success. Rumor is often the surest source of disruptions and sometimes civic life can appear to

hang in the balance. One afternoon in the 1990's I finished some meetings at the American embassy in Mexico City and chatted with an old friend who had worked in the State Department for many years, including several assignments to Mexico. I had mentioned to him that I would leave in two days with pressing meetings in Austin and then to Washington. He said, "Well, I have heard that tomorrow the airline employees are planning a strike so you might move your plans up to this evening or in the morning by the latest." I asked to use his phone and hurriedly made new reservations to leave in the late afternoon.

I asked him if he ever worried that he might be stranded in Mexico City and how would he get out if there were general strikes. His wife and children lived in Mexico City and getting back to the States could be a challenge. He smiled and said, "All you need is a late model Mercury Monterrey. You smoke the windows and pull the license plates." We both laughed as that was the vehicle then favored by the high ranking drug traffickers in cities like Mexico City or Guadalajara. It was presumed that such persons would own the local police and maybe even the *Federales* (the Mexican Federal Police). As I pulled my papers together, I said to him, "Why do we continue to try to understand Mexico. Perhaps it is best left alone." He said, "Mike, the great fear for 50 years is what do we do with a dead elephant on our doorstep?"

### **The Indian South**

Many forces serve to challenge the power of the central state. In contrast to Mexico City and the northern areas south of Mexico City, with the exception of tourist spots such as Acapulco on the west or Merida to the east in the Yucatan, are where Mexicans of more fully and full Indian descent and culture are predominant. One challenge is the pull of traditional cultures never fully assimilated into the *mestizo* state. This is strongest in the Mayan lands of the Gulf Coast and the

## Mexico: Past, Present and Future

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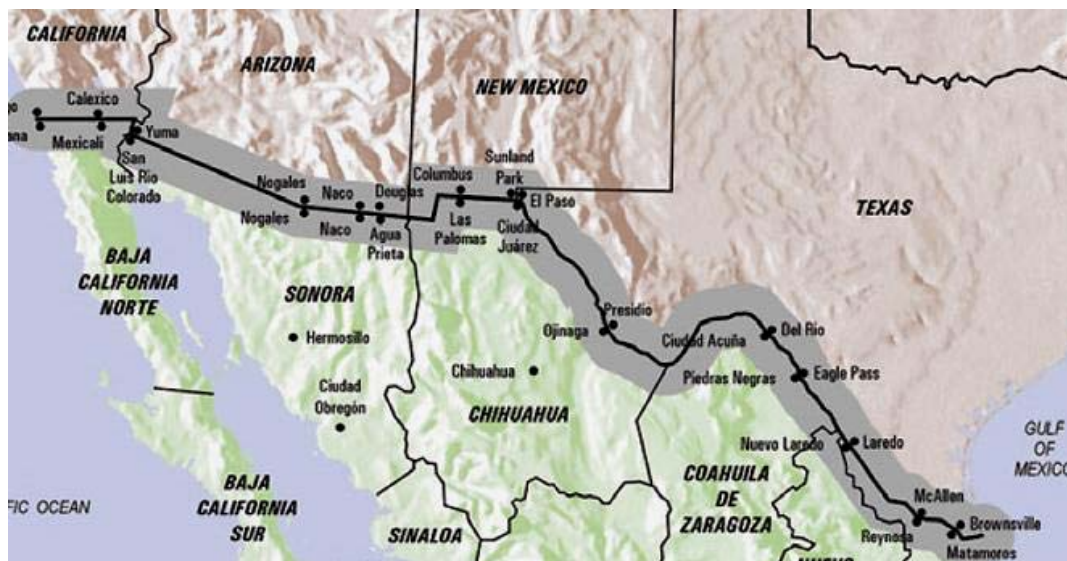
southern states like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Tabasco. Spanish literacy is less, poverty is greater, and illegal immigration of indigenous people from Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador create problems not unlike those in the southwestern United States. These immigrants are poorer, less educated, and often in poor health. Perhaps 30 percent of the population south of Mexico City speak the traditional Indian languages of Zapotec, Mixtec, Nahuatl, and Mayan.

These are lands of traditional villages often with strong rivalries and plagued by the loss of tribal lands to large farms. This loss of land to wealthy elites began to stir strong feelings of protest which were supported by both a liberation philosophy from some Roman Catholic priests and notions of personal salvation presented by Protestant missionaries. Indeed, an interesting feature of the south of Mexico has been the activities of these two religious groups. These areas are the seat of radical separatist movements in the 1990's against the central government in Mexico City. This has long been the land of the *sureños*, far more true to Indian beliefs than Roman Catholicism or Mexican nationalism. The growing narco traffic of illegal drugs moving north from

South America introduces an important destabilizing force moving along both the Gulf and the Pacific coast.

### The Independent North

Regional differences are most pronounced and changing in the north where travel, media, trade, and currency provide a strong draw toward American culture. Many of the states north of Mexico City are arid and mountainous and were sparsely populated in pre-Hispanic times. As noted, the successful warrior characteristics of the Comanche and the Apache and Yaqui to the west kept the control of Mexico City weak and erratic. Today, many of these states and larger cities beginning 200 miles north of Mexico City are often closely linked to the American side by business, travel, and family ties. Guadalajara, Torreon, and Monterrey have ready auto and air connections to the American side, and English is as commonly spoken there as it is in the higher income areas of Mexico City. Shopping trips to Texas cities have always been common and wealthier Mexicans use medical facilities in Houston and San Antonio, and it is traditional to have children acquire college educations in the United States.



### The Border

Ties with the American side are even deeper in the “twin cities” that extend in the east from Brownsville and Matamoros through El Paso and Ciudad Juarez to San Diego and Tijuana. The Mexicans refer to this zone as “*La Frontera*.” It is a transition zone between the two cultures, clearly neither Mexican nor American. With its rapid growth and access to the rest of North America it may be the most rapidly changing part of North America.

This zone has a joint population of about 30 million and extends easily 150 miles north in the United States and south into Mexico. The relations are most intense and complex on the Texas border as compared to New Mexico’s, Arizona’s, and California’s. Well-to-do Mexicans own homes on Padre Island or in the southern mountains of New Mexico. Houston and San Antonio with their university medical schools provide high quality health expertise to Mexican clients. Shopping visits include malls in Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and Dallas. For more than 20 years Mexicans have kept bank accounts in the border states to protect against weakness in the Mexican peso. Until the wars of the drug cartels began, there were steady flows of shoppers and vacationers from states like Texas and California to border cities, to the Mexican Gulf and Pacific coast, and in the case of California far down the state of Baja California.

Indeed, those of the north are called *nortenos*, and they are known for their lack of subtlety, their aggressiveness, and their more abrupt ways. Their skills with the land and the cattle they imported from Spain created the *vaquero* that became the basis of the American cowboy. American notions of the West with personal characteristics of independence, entrepreneurial effort, and distrust of distant formal authority find resonance in the north and produce a continual concern in Mexico City that America will again grab a piece of Mexico as it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These fears are made real with the Americanizing influence of

the *maquilas*, the power of American media, the waning riches of oil, and the new centers of power provided by the lucrative illegal drug trade to America.

Since the 1980’s, much of western Mexico has become a contested land as cocaine, methamphetamines, marijuana, and heroin are moved by land, air, and sea. These narco powers began to be evident in the 1970’s especially in the western state of Sinaloa where its capital, Culiacan, became headquarters for packaging marijuana and opium grown in its remote mountainous valleys and cocaine brought up the west coast for shipment into the United States. Even as the United States was successfully disturbing the Caribbean drug route into Miami, a far larger and more sophisticated system of drug distribution was growing across the northern states and cities of Mexico. A similar pattern exists along the Gulf. Major entry points are at the twin cities with Laredo and El Paso perhaps the largest. These gateways or plazas (the bridges between the cities) are the zones where competing cartels seek to control access to move illegal drugs north and dollars south.

Frequently both Mexico City and Washington, D.C., write off the battles of the drug cartels and the growing brutality as a continuation of the wild and degraded nature of the border cities. Mexico City has never been in favor of these cities as they have been seen simply as embarrassing tourist spots to serve the more base nature of the Gringos. They have also long been a source of concern as they represent a not-so-subtle incursion of American ways into Mexico. What this misses, with its view of the violence as a law-enforcement matter, is that the extent, duration, and brutality are now a challenge to the existence of the Mexican state itself. The American response of bringing to bear its Federal resources, including the military and the recent use of terms such as “surge,” are redolent of American efforts in Iraq. Northern Mexico or all of Mexico is not Iraq. In Mexico and certainly in northern Mexico

and the American southwest are 500 years of contact and mutual trade. Men in armored vehicles wearing military uniforms and masks will not solve the problem. Soldering and policing are two very different tasks and to mistake one for the other can lead to disaster.

The problems derive from the failure of economic development on the Mexican side. The distance and misunderstandings of Mexico City for its northern areas are part of the reason. The drug appetite of the American side is another part of the reason. Today the United States is dependent upon Mexico for oil imports. Mexico is dependent upon the United States for food imports. The drug violence tells us more of the failure of understanding and leadership of both sides than simply the failure of policing.

### Summary-The Challenges for Mexico

These are the challenges facing Mexico today. One is the role of the Mexican state and the psychological orientations of the citizens. Since pre-Hispanic times much of the society has seen the state as externally imposed, controlled by various conquerors, and a vehicle that exploits citizens. The state will alternatively use force and subsidies to secure compliance. The citizen views the state warily as a corrupt vehicle from the local cop to the highest office. A dedicated and honest civil service is less well-developed than in many modern societies. Some promise occurred in the late 1980's with the departure of the Miguel de la Madrid administration, which signaled the end of the monopoly power of the PRI that had dominated all of Mexico since the 1910 revolution and the appearance of alternative political parties in the south but especially in the north of Mexico. Vicente Fox and then Felipe Calderon of the PAN provided some hope of more viable political institutions. Institutions survive either from coercion or trust. Neither is in adequate supply for Mexico today. The strength of *confianza* betrays the weakness of the nation.

A second challenge is the high level of pov-

erty, including a small middle class. Repeatedly in Mexican history the distribution of income has favored the very few with the greater percentage of the population existing in great poverty. Oil and industrialization were the hopes to correct this condition but progress has stagnated. Without a large and strong middle class, the government and the wealthy are at risk of economic decline and class-based conflict. The fact that many wealthy people and even ones of moderate means fear kidnappings for ransom is an illustration of the decline in the Mexican state. Mexico will be unable to survive as the largely urban nation of today without economic engines to provide jobs and sustenance and, through these means, security.

A third challenge is the need for more and higher paying secure jobs in the Mexican economy. While the last thirty years have seen great progress in moving from a rural and agricultural state with much subsistence-based agriculture, far too many factory jobs have low skill levels and low pay. This has been much of the legacy of the *maquilas*, jobs of limited intellectual and skill content exported from the United States, Germany, and Japan to a cheap labor state. Globalization of such labor has forced Mexico not to compete just with American labor that is paid by a factor of 10 or more per unit of work but with workers in China and India where wages are a fraction of already low Mexican wages.

A fourth challenge is the decline of producing oil fields to generate funds for the State and export earnings. Without these earnings Mexico can neither command nor coerce loyalty to the state. The large earnings from illegal drugs, the proximity to the American side where there is money and a market for the drugs, and the readily available weapons that can be purchased in a Houston or Los Angeles build an alternative government in the northern lands.

A fifth challenge is the current economic decline in the United States. For many decades the U.S. has served as a safety valve for the unem-

ployed of Mexico who could find earnings here. During the real estate boom of the last decade millions of Mexicans found work in real estate construction and related fields. With the bursting of the real estate bubble those jobs are gone, which increases unemployment of Mexicans in the United States or sees their return to cities in Mexico, which already has too few jobs.

A sixth challenge is the fact that the north of Mexico has always looked as much to the United States as to Mexico City as its center of gravity. As earnings from oil and manufacturing decline, the ties of the north to the United States will strengthen. The growth of PAN majorities in cities and states of the north challenge the powerful grip of Mexico City. The existence of drug cartels as an alternative to government gives pause to the assurance that Mexico can continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it did in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

#### **A Dead Elephant on the Doorstep**

A decade ago Texans first began to be concerned about the changing demographics of their state. The state demographer, Steve Murdock (Murdock 1996), extrapolated interim census estimates and suggested by 2030 or so Texas would become a minority-majority state. The most populous ethnic group would be persons of Mexican descent and they would become the majority. Murdock focused his report on several attributes of Mexican-Americans in Texas and similar attributes of Mexican citizens. Among Murdock's points and extrapolations were that Mexican-Americans had the lowest levels of school attainment and highest levels of school dropouts of all ethnic groups in Texas. Lower educational levels mean lower incomes and perhaps higher crime rates. Importantly Mexican-Americans were less likely to vote, participate in civic organizations, own a business, serve on juries, school boards, etc. They were as a group in Texas like Mexicans in Mexico, and that as a culture very wary of civic engagement. Murdock concluded that without cultural change, Texas in 2030 would be more

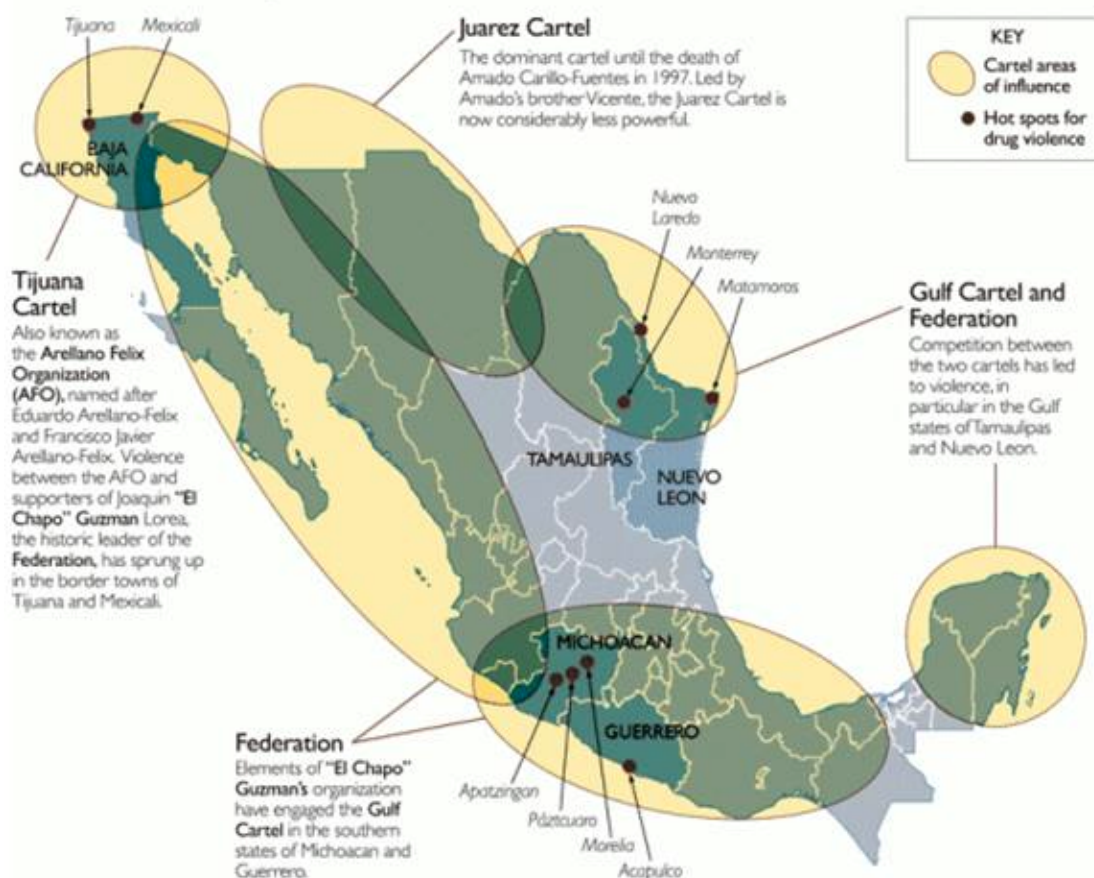
like northern Mexico, more populous, less educated, younger, and poorer. Such findings have substantial significance when viewed through the lenses of theories of social participation and innovation (Sampson 1988; Putnam 1996; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003).

Mexico's challenges are substantial and enduring. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it made great progress in economic development and improving education, housing, and health for greater percentages of the population. It entered the global arena of labor and manufacturing and now is exposed to these forces seeing India, China, and even Central American countries competing for manufacturing for lower wages than Mexico's. Its largest trading partner is the United States but that exposes the country more to the vagaries of the American economy. The violence, now endemic not just on the border but in much of Mexico, is the more visible indicator of a nation that may be failing. Past solutions have partial adequacy, and desperate migration to the Southwest border is already producing alarms in many American states.

As my recounting of conversations with friends and colleagues in Mexico some years ago, much about Mexico remains mysterious to Americans and perhaps to Mexicans as well. Part of the mystery is that facts about Mexico's economy, its governments, and much of its social organization are elusive, and that may be deeply rooted in the anthropology and psychology of Mexico. That is part of what my old physician friend explained as I puzzled about trying to secure a population estimate of Mexican cities. My sense was then and is today that there are few "facts" about Mexico.

Today there is a dimension of this reality as well in the States. Unemployment statistics in the United States are illustrative. The Labor Department reported in December, 2008, a national unemployment rate of 7.2%. However because of reporting and statistical adjustments over the last 20 years this rate underestimates what would have been reported in the 1980's. Today's rate

## The Mexican Drug Cartels' Areas of Influence



**Source:** The Merida Initiative, "Guns, Drugs, and Friends", S. Prt. 110-35. Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate. 110<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. December 21, 2007, pp. 7-8, at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110\\_cong\\_senate\\_committee\\_prints&docid=f.39644.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_senate_committee_prints&docid=f.39644.pdf) (July 11, 2008).

appears to underestimate the underemployed and the discouraged worker. John Williams runs one popular internet site that provides sharply different figures than those provided by entities like the Department of Labor and the Federal Reserve. (Williams 2008)

Nevertheless my experience is that the disconnect between the citizen, including the intellec-

tual, and the government is greater in Mexico than it is in the United States. This is a potentially perilous state of affairs for any nation if trust erodes in the government, its currency, and its official numbers.

A second part of the mystery is the fragility of the labor market in Mexico as expressed memorably for me by the paradoxical reactions of UNAM

liberals to the assault at Tiananmen Square. It remains as vulnerable today. Mexico does not have the educational infrastructure to provide high school and college to most of its population. Without education, especially at the higher levels, Mexico cannot generate an economy that provides high levels of jobs and income, which translate to wealth. (Meyer, Sherman et al., 2003; Heckman 2008; Katz 2008)

A third part is the whispered fear of persons long familiar with Mexico of what could be the American response in the face of a failed state in Mexico. Other contributions in this volume examine some of the detail of the criminal gangs that now plague all of Mexico. To a great extent law enforcement in Mexico has been corrupt for decades by the standards of the United States, Canada, and much of Europe. Municipal police offices have supported themselves with fines, and in some areas an officer's beat is his franchise. There have been times and locales in the United States when this was true but it is more continuous and pervasive in Mexico. However, in the last two decades the degree of corruption, violence, organized cartels, money, and direct challenge to the government are without precedent in a hundred years. Efforts to control the plazas, the bridges that lead from Mexican border cities into the United States, have rendered cities such as Nuevo Laredo, Juarez, and Tijuana combat zones with deaths in Juarez alone in 2008 running about 3,000. It is the visibility and urgency associated with this violence that is forcing the Mexican topic on the United States and the border question on Mexico City. As President Calderon has sought to control the violence in the border, the result seems to be that the cartels have moved to challenge the government itself. High level officials have been killed, and kidnapping for ransom long a fear of the wealthy in Mexico now appears at rate of 40 a week and afflicts the middle class as well as the wealthy.

So far the American response has been either increased police presence or, failing that, the use

of military forces and strategies. That is also the Mexican response. This is not promising and may prove paradoxical. Significant among the major violent entities of the Mexican cartel are groups known as Zetas. These are felt to be former members of the Mexican army trained at elite military posts by the United States Army to improve command functioning and combat in asymmetrical situations. These are cartel members with intimate knowledge of the weapons and tactics that the American military has evolved to use in situations like Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They are using these skills against Mexican civilians, police, and the military with devastating effect.

Hasty solutions are the most likely to yield unintended consequences. The American response to date is slow and only beginning to develop. Other urgencies -- including wars in the Middle East, terrible storms along the Gulf, and spreading economic problems -- have delayed recognition of how dire the situation is. Mexico's problems play more to immediate "bites in the 24 hour cycle of cable news" than to a considered, long-term understanding of the cultures and economies of the two nations. An effective response must include changes in the educational system in both countries, efforts to understand the very significantly different cultural outlooks between Americans and Mexicans, strategic choices in manufacturing directions and energy development, greater transparency in government at all levels, adjustments in saving and consumption patterns, restrictions and controls on certain trade and labor items, and structured interventions in civic participation. Without such fundamental efforts, more police, soldiers, walls, and helicopters run the risk of being only palliative.

With a crashing world economy, the bankruptcy of some of America's grandest banks, brokerages, insurance companies, and even auto manufacturers, a new President in the United States, anger and fear building in American communities toward outsiders, rising unemployment, sharp oscillations in the price of oil, and a deep

apprehension of cartel violence on both sides of the border, the United States and Mexico must act judiciously and with all deliberate speed to address these issues.

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