

## Jesse Helms's Politics of Confrontation

*The ultra-right Senator from North Carolina goes after Mexico's head, and relations between the two countries hit an all-time low.*

As recently as February 1985, tension ran so high between Mexico and the United States that the Mexican government referred to the state of relations as being "hypercritical." And now, little over a year later, voices were again raised on either side of the border, and a new clash has occurred in the complex relationship between two truly distant neighbors.

The hearings held by Senator Jesse Helms in the Western Hemisphere Affairs Sub-Committee, featuring Reagan administration officials, were originally scheduled for April.

Twice postponed, the hearings finally took place at a time when the scouring criticism from its powerful northern neighbor most affected Mexico.

Senator Helms's hearings seem to have been scheduled with the specific purpose of stirring further difficulties at a time when Mexico was facing two tremendously challenging situations. On the one hand, given the precarious standing of the country's foreign reserves, Mexico faced the dilemma of whether to continue debt payments or to declare a moratorium. The second problem involved decisions concerning the handling of the electoral apparatus in the upcoming elections in the state of Chihuahua, where the right-wing opposition National Action Party, the PAN, has gained enough support to challenge the ruling party's hegemony.

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The problem of drug traffic and how to fight it was not the only issue dealt with during the so-called May crisis. Economic and political implications were so important that the very legitimacy of the Mexican government was called into question. Nor is the crisis limited to the scope of bilateral relations. It touches on delicate nerves of national politics, the Chihuahua elections, and of the regional situation, such as the question of whether Mexico keeps silent vis a vis the U.S.'s increasing intervention in Central America, or opposes it.

The hearings obviously recreated the hypertensive climate which had supposedly been overcome. And Mexico delivered a surprisingly strong response. The Mexican chancellery sent the State Department a "note of protest", which is the strongest language possible in diplomatic terms.

During the first hearing, criticism of Mexico coming from Senator Helms, from Under-Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams, and from Customs chief Wil-

liam von Raab, all received great coverage. Testimony from the DEA and the CIA concerning the increase in drug-traffic activity, police corruption and electoral fraud in 1985, also received a great deal of publicity.

The Reagan administration was aware that testimony from these officials before the Senate sub-committee would irritate Mexico. Mr. Helms himself went public with something that should have remained confidential: that the Mexican embassy in Washington had called him several times to warn that the hearings would "provoke rifts in a highly sensitive relationship..."

These facts, together with the absence of direct, official excuses for what was said at the hearings, clearly show that Senator Helms' initiative was no stranger to the White House strategy toward Mexico. On the contrary, the hearings complement the game of pressure and gestures aimed at forcing the Mexican government into acting in accordance with U.S. interests.

On the other hand, there was an initially favorable response to Mexico's note of protest, though this was so only in the press. This was one of those rare occasions when the U.S. press picked up on the points of view of Mexican officials regarding matters of concern to both countries.

The Mexican note stated that the declarations heard in the sub-committee were of an "interventionist nature" and "constituted a clear and inadmissible violation of Mexican sovereignty." The Senate hearings were described in the note as "an unfriendly attitude toward my country."

But despite the strong terms used by the Mexican government in its protest, there was an attempt to keep the Reagan



The defense of national sovereignty brings together different political forces.

Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar

administration out of it: "My government expresses its displeasure at the lack of coincidence with the recognition President Ronald Reagan and his closest advisors have expressed in favor of Mexico's efforts to advance our bilateral relations."

The phrase was meant to overlook the participation of Abrams and Von Raab in the hearings, both of whom are Reagan administration officials, and by no means part of the

"small group of Senators" referred to in the communiqué. This generous concession on the part of the Mexican chancellery was not responded to with equal elegance by Secretary of State Shultz. He merely responded that he "took note of Mexico's concern," and immediately proceeded to restate the need for Mexico to recognize the gravity of the drug-traffic problem and to increase efforts to control it.

## March to Defend National Sovereignty

On May 21, a large demonstration was held in Mexico City, called by an ad hoc group of public figures, representing a variety of progressive political, economic, social and cultural sectors. The march was called to express discontent over the declarations made in the Helms Senate Subcommittee a few days earlier. Writers, former government officials, current members of Congress, Ministers of State, governors, political delegates, labor leaders, businessmen and students participated to voice their response to pressures emanating from the U.S., regarding a series of internal Mexican matters.

Several thousand demonstrators marched from the Mexican Revolution's Monument to the Zócalo (main city square), where there was a short rally to denounce the U.S. campaign to defame our country, led by ultra-right sectors. The participation of people from very diverse political and ideological positions, as well as the strong anti-interventionist slogans coming from them, made the event particularly noteworthy.

Such important figures as Mexico's former representative to the U.N., Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, the director of CREA, Heriberto Galindo, PRI Congressman, Juan José Bremer, the director of ISS-STE\* Alejandro Carrillo Castro, the Under-Secretary of Banks, Carlos Sales, and former ambassador to Cuba, Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá were present at the march and rally.

Just before the rally began, a communiqué was read, issued by the Permanent Commission of the Congress, which

acknowledged the right of members of Congress to participate voluntarily in the demonstration. It also expressed their open repudiation of the interventionist attitude of certain groups in the U.S. Senate.

The only speaker was actress Ofelia Medina. She read a statement representing the official position of the march's sponsors and participants. Interrupted several times as the crowd shouted anti-interventionist slogans, Medina recounted the numerous forms of pressure being exerted on Mexico from the United States. And she explained the logic behind the kinds of statements made in the Senate Hearings: "They've been quite explicit in saying that they'll pressure Mexico from all sides to make us conform to their interests, their prejudices, their messianic ideology, their desires to dominate our nation."

At the close of the rally, the participants all sang the national anthem, but not before first chanting party slogans and others supporting the President's foreign policy and criticizing international financial institutions.

As the participants slowly dispersed, the event's sponsors stayed around to exchange their impressions with other political, economic and cultural leaders. Several of them talked to us about their opinions on the Senate Hearings and the kinds of reactions they've sparked throughout Mexico.

Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, formerly Mexico's ambassador to the United Nations, stated that the march demonstrated

national solidarity in support of our country's basic principles, and that in fact, it represented the formation of a national democratic front for independence and the preservation of national values.

A number of people expressed the opinion that the march unified the interests of diverse social and political sectors in defense of the nation. Heriberto Galindo, director of the National Council of Resources for Youth (CREA), stated that a variety of different political and ideological positions were represented among the groups that participated in the Zócalo rally and that made it a landmark event. He continued by saying that mass mobilizations can be a form of support for the government.

Héctor Aguilar Camín, winner of the 1986 national journalism award, argued that some of the opinions expressed in the Senate Hearings were in line with historical efforts to make Mexico conform, to define the course of its institutional development and to align its foreign policy to that of the U.S. During the VOICES interview he reaffirmed his view that national unity is the best response to those kinds of pressures.

Rolando Cordera Campos, noted Mexican economist, offered his view that the recent proceedings in the U.S. Senate form part of a policy designed to intervene in affairs that are only for Mexicans to discuss and define. That's why the response was so broad. The real problem, he believes, lies in the fact that this kind of intervention finds its echo in some minority political groups. Nonetheless, the majority response has been to reject those efforts, and that is positive. This rally is a clear demonstration, he concluded for VOICES, of the consensus in Mexican society against intervention in our

national affairs.

Some public officials, such as former Under-Secretary of Culture and current member of the National Congress, Juan José Bremer, were also present for the demonstration through Mexico City's streets. In an exclusive interview, Bremer declared that the march was an event of great political importance. It showed that despite ideological differences or differences in political perspective, members of political organizations or unions, artists, intellectuals, teachers, students or just ordinary citizens -the vast majority of Mexicans- have the right to resolve their own problems, to debate over how to organize our society and our economy and to deal with the great challenges ahead. And it also reflected our right to energetically reject any attempts to interfere in our affairs.

The country's patriotic sectors have responded with great indignation. That's how Eraclio Zepeda put it. The well-known writer and member of Congress declared that the march marked the beginning of a new possibility for a grass-roots alliance. The country is in orisis and in danger. We must advance toward a new national solidarity, involving new social forces. He continued that any possibility to forge unity in defense of the nation is always exhilarating, it excites us and recaptures the best of Mexico's traditions. Whenever the country has been united, it has always won. Any time that our enemies have detected strong divisions among us, they've tried to weaken us. The time has come to unite.

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\* Social Security Institute that provides health care for Mexican state workers.

## the nation

Nor have subsequent statements by other U.S. officials, as part of an ongoing verbal war, clearly distanced themselves from the central point of the accusations. On the contrary, those points of view have been reiterated. The accusations made by Von Raab, John Gavin and Helms to the effect that two Mexican governors, Antonio Toledo Corro of Sinaloa, and Félix Valdés of Sonora, produce drugs on their ranches, have not been retracted, nor have they been proven, either. Attorney General Edwin Meese has yet to distance himself from these accusations.

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But the effects of Mexico's note of protest were short-lived. Shortly after the note was sent, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Bernardo Sepúlveda expressed satisfaction over Mr. Shultz's response. A national-level anti-intervention demonstration took place in the Zócalo in Mexico City, and was attended by leaders from the PRI\* and left political parties.

Significantly, the PAN refused to join the chorus of voices that condemned Jesse Helms. The National Action Party no doubt counts on its allies in the north for support of its strategy, announced following the elections in Chihuahua. It was obviously not going to join in a movement that ended up expressing support for the Mexican government and confronting the very same sectors in the U.S. that the PAN hoped would support them in their charge of fraud in the Chihuahua elections.

An additional factor that Mr. Helms probably has in mind is President De la Madrid's forthcoming visit to Washington. The memory is still fresh of how President Reagan made drug traffic the central issue when the two heads of state met in Tijuana in December of last year, despite Mexico's diplomatic efforts to the contrary.

Presidents Reagan and De la Madrid have opposing points of view on this issue. The U.S. government's concern for fighting drug traffic has been raised to strategic priority level and likened to terrorism; and this is an expression of the current administration's profoundly conservative point of view.★

\* The Institutional Revolutionary Party, in power.