



¿Qué son los Estados Unidos?

(What Is the United States?)

Rafael Fernández de Castro and Claudia Franco (comp.)

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Thinking about the role that the United States has or could have in today's world has been behind countless debates and unfinished exercises. More attention has been paid to the United States in our country since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the need to know better the neighbor with whom we share a 2,597 kilometer border has also increased. But for most Mexicans, understanding what the United States is means saying, "It's very close, but very far away at the same time." It means knowing that it is the world's most powerful country, but also recognizing that we really know nothing about it, its culture, its interests or its inhabitants, among other things.

The complexity of our proximity to the United States has led a group of internationalist academics concerned

with knowing and understanding our northern neighbor—with which we share not only a border, but also economic interests and common problems—to bring out a book entitled *¿Qué son los Estados Unidos?* (What Is the United States?).

The book covers 10 different topics that the compilers considered the most important for an initial understanding of the country. *¿Qué son los Estados Unidos?* provides a general overview of the country, from its origins and the development of U.S. political thought, to its consolidation as a nation-state. Important actors like the Congress, the executive branch and the judicial system are examined clearly and concisely from a Mexican perspective.

Throughout history several systemic and internal elements have permeated Mexico-U.S. relations. Mexico's economic transformations undoubtedly played a preponderant role; Mexican economic liberalization enormously facilitated transactions between the two countries. The systemic factors had important repercussions in the new bilateral relationship. The end of the Cold War, in addition to having freed Washington from enormous expenditures, also made it clear that there had been steps forward in the different economic regional blocs, mainly in Western Europe.

One of the little studied but essential factors in understanding the new relationship between the two governments is their new way of dealing with it. To exemplify how the complex U.S. political system works, particular-

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ly its decision-making processes, the book takes a look at Mexican lobbying efforts during the NAFTA negotiations. Topics like trade and foreign policy underline how important it is for our country to have a systematic understanding of U.S. international behavior in politics and trade.

The book allows us to understand the prerogatives shared by the executive and legislative branches of U.S. government, as well as detailing the relationship between the institutional prerogatives of the presidency, Congress and the political process itself. Finally, questions like the unequal relationship between the majority and minorities—particularly the Hispanic minorities—and the role of the media in determining the U.S. political agenda are carefully examined.

¿Qué son los Estados Unidos? comes out at a time when Mexican-U.S. relations have to be realistically and systematically analyzed. As Robert Pastor said in his review of the same book, “One of the great obstacles that the Mexico-U.S. relationship has to overcome is the lack of mutual understanding. The United States is seen as a big corporation from the point of view of Mexico-based research. This is explained in part because the relationship has been one of constant frustration.”

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