

# Mexican foreign policy's new activism in the U.S.

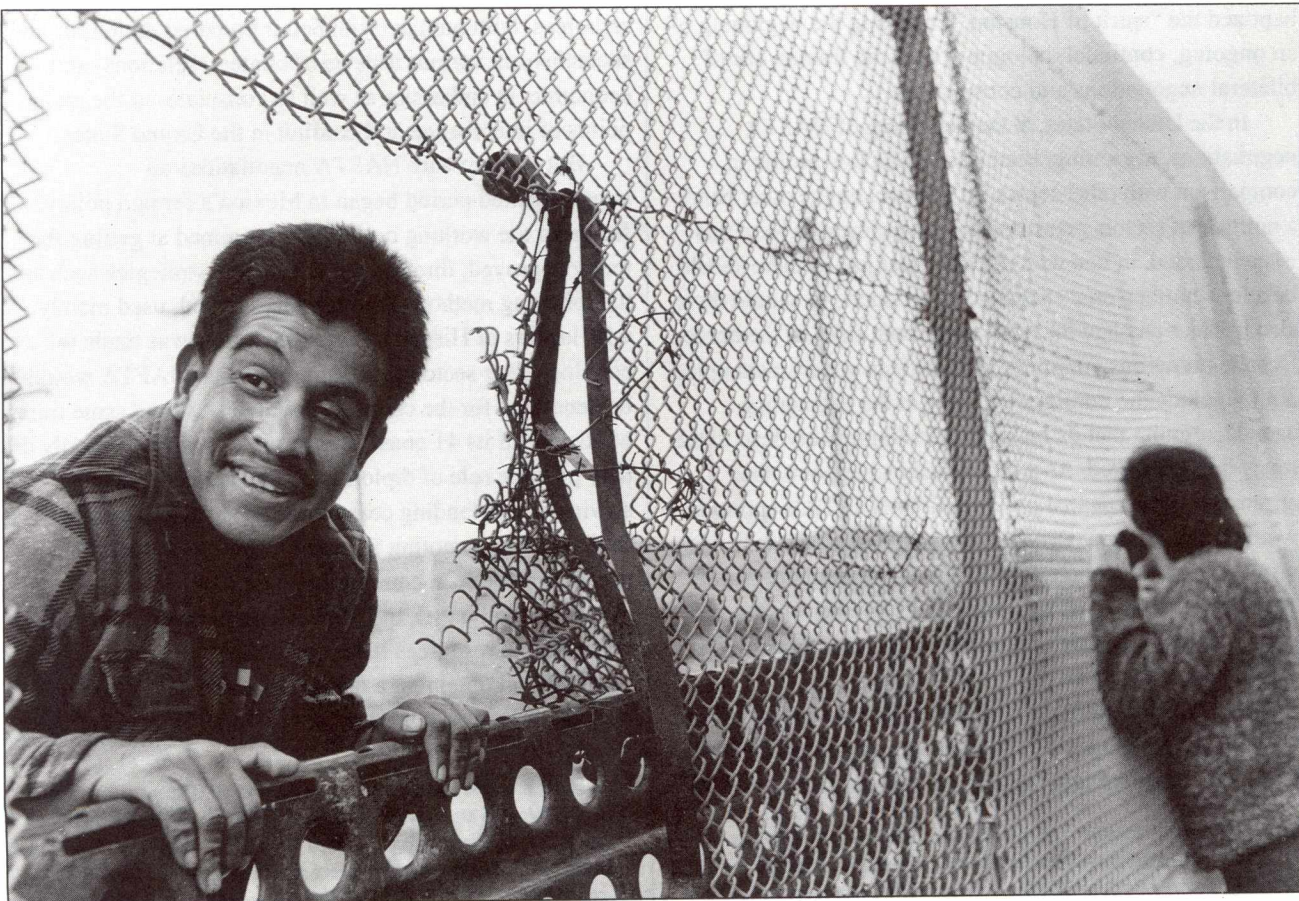
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**U**ntil a few years ago, the Mexican government's efforts in the United States concentrated almost exclusively on establishing high-quality representation, above all in Washington and some key cities where there is a heavy flow of human and economic resources between the two countries. In terms of the executive branch, only a few channels had been

opened, other than in the State Department, while relations with Congress were virtually non-existent.

One of the reasons given for this limitation has been a lack of knowledge regarding the U.S. political system, linked to a desire to export our own centralist view of political management, giving excessive weight to the executive and very little to the legislative branch. Yet it was not until the beginning of this decade, when we began negotiations towards the North American Free Trade Agreement

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Undocumented workers at the U.S.-Mexico border.

(NAFTA), that we understood the need for significant efforts aimed at providing Mexico with more connections in the United States. Thus, in order to get the treaty approved, multiple contacts were established with key players, as well as with many different agencies of Congress and the executive branch, mainly in Washington.

Mexico's new activism in the United States also motivated a much more active dialogue among many different players, creating a myriad of networks and interactions among officials from very different sectors and levels, which has led to a more extensive inter-institutional relationship between, for example: governors and officials from both nations' border states, workers, academics, communications media, merchants, businessmen and members of the Mexican communities in both countries. Noteworthy as well is the basic role Mexican political parties have been playing in several regions of the U.S., above all during the 1988 and 1994 election campaigns, where leaders of several parties campaigned heavily in order to obtain support.

Starting with NAFTA negotiations, the Mexican and U.S. governments adopted a new, positive attitude, baptized the "spirit of Houston,"<sup>1</sup> marking the beginning of an ongoing, continual dialogue within the framework of bilateral negotiations and consultation.

In the United States, at the beginning of NAFTA negotiations, the immigration issue had a low profile in comparison with other topics. In Mexico, on the other hand, a number of sectors pressured the government to have this issue included, in line with the view that just as there should be a less cumbersome exchange of products, so should there also be freer passage for workers on both sides of the border. Despite numerous pressures, the Mexican government opted not to include the immigration issue in the negotiating agenda, arguing that its inclusion would probably lead to the treaty being rejected. As a counterbalancing point, the argument was made that one benefit of NAFTA's approval would be that a more dynamic exchange of products would promote greater economic development throughout North America, thereby creating a significant number of jobs and, consequently, reducing prevailing pressures in Mexico for emigration to the north.

It is worth recalling that the Mexican government has been seeking dialogue on immigration matters since 1940 and, while this dialogue has been initiated on a number of

occasions, in reality collaboration between the two nations' governments has been highly limited. While on innumerable occasions Mexico has sought to have the issue negotiated bilaterally, the U.S. decided to deal with it unilaterally.

A recent example was approval of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), when U.S. authorities did not consult the Mexican government, either *a priori* or *posteriori*, regarding the consequences this bill could have. For its part, Mexico abstained from intervening or engaging in political activism in the United States aimed at preventing or discouraging approval of this law, which could have led to mass deportations during periods when Mexico was going through economic crises. This near-silence was interpreted as tacit agreement or acceptance of the bill, since, in some ways, many thousands of Mexicans who were living without documents in the U.S. would be favored by provisions for regularizing their status through the temporary or permanent legalization of around 2.5 million undocumented Mexican immigrants.

During the late 1980s attention could be said to focus almost exclusively on a significant reinforcement of resources, both human (with better prepared diplomats and specialists on various aspects of bilateral relations) and economic, in embassies as well as consulates at the main points of interchange and conflict in the United States.

But starting with NAFTA negotiations an unprecedented period began in Mexico's foreign policy, featuring the working out of policies aimed at getting the treaty approved, through the use of new strategies such as the lobbying method. Through this method, used mainly with leaders of Hispanic origin, the effort was made to convince their sector or communities that NAFTA would be beneficial for the countries involved.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Mexico used its 41 consulates as never before. Not only did they play the role of diplomatic enclaves dedicated to serving and defending compatriots; they also became missions for promoting free trade, above all within the Mexican-American community.

In general terms, the Mexican government, with the considerable resources it devoted to lobbying, was successful in obtaining a favorable response in several milieux. It gained a more positive image, despite the

<sup>1</sup> The "spirit of Houston" —a watershed in Mexico-U.S. relations— characterized the presidential session held in Houston in October 1989, where George Bush and Carlos Salinas decided to undertake NAFTA negotiations for the benefit of both countries.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to stress the hiring of prominent Hispanic leaders such as Washington attorney Abelardo Valdez, Edward Hidalgo and Tony Anaya (Todd Eisenstadt, "Cabildeo y relaciones públicas," *Este País*, June 1992). The last twelve votes needed for approving the treaty's so-called "fast track" in the United States Congress were obtained thanks to lobbying efforts directed at Mexican-American or Hispanic groups.

### Proposition 187 and higher education

In order to evaluate the impact Proposition 187's approval may have on higher education for California's population of Mexican origin, one should keep in mind that Latinos or Hispanics are considerably behind in terms of education, and that the highest drop-out rates and incidence of learning problems are found among the Mexican-derived population.

The problem begins at the elementary-school level, in the overall context of unfavorable socio-economic conditions for Mexican communities in the U.S. The situation is particularly serious for the undocumented population, for temporary and newly-arrived residents, although it has been shown that there is not always a correlation between longer periods of residency and better school performance.

The reality is that complex problems of school and learning segregation influence the low rates at which Mexicans and Chicanos enter higher education, as well as their high drop-out rates. In the field of education, despite the gains made in the '60s and '70s, the '80s brought a clear pattern of retreat in terms of coverage, bilingual education and access to higher education.

In a paper read in Mexico City, Chicana expert Margo de Ley noted that recent studies show an erosion in the educational position of the Chicano population and in particular among Mexican groups recently arrived in the United States. "Less than half of young Chicanos finish high school," she noted. This translates into lower rates of entry to higher education.

The overall educational scene was discouraging at the end of the last decade because of reductions in the U.S. budget for education. According to Ley: "There was a reduction in funds for the program aimed at keeping young people in higher educational institutions, as well as cuts in pre-school education, bilingual education and university recruitment programs."

The problem of scarce access to middle and higher education for the Mexican-derived population is directly related to this sector's high levels of social disadvantage. In 1990 more than 6 million Latinos (of whom an estimated 4 million are of Mexican origin, half of them living in California) were below the poverty line.

Of the six million Latinos living in poverty, 2,750,000 were under the age of 18. More than two million (1.3 million of them under the age of 18) were in families headed by single mothers. An estimated 500,000 Mexican children were living in this situation in California.

The socio-economic conditions of the Mexican-derived population, together with the growth of educational policies which restrict bilingual education budgets or coverage, help explain the deterioration of education, high drop-out rates and low scholastic performance seen in recent years.

Nevertheless, one should avoid mechanically applying the idea that recent immigrants, who are relatively poorer and less integrated into Anglo-Saxon society, always make fewer educational advances. Studies by María Matute-Bianchi showed that the most recent Mexican immigrants, as well as descendants of Mexican immigrants who maintain a separate identity as Mexicans within the context of their experiences in the United States, tend to have relatively good school performance, often outstripping Chicano students.

In fact, in California Mexican immigrants as a group have higher school performance than Mexican-Americans born in the U.S., according to a 1989 University of California study entitled *The Challenge, Latinos in a Changing California*. Most of the estimated 300,000 undocumented Mexican students in California are in primary or secondary school, while only 15 percent of Latino high-school graduates are admitted to California's state university system, and only a fraction of that number actually enroll.

Rodrigo Martínez, an educational researcher based in Tijuana, estimates that over 40,000 Mexican higher-education students risk losing their educational rights if Proposition 187 is applied. The majority of undocumented Mexicans in higher education attend two-year community colleges. Less than 10 percent of students in California's university system are of Mexican origin, while between 30 and 50 percent of students in community colleges are Chicano or Mexican, and in the Los Angeles area this figure is even higher.

One current problem relates to Mexican students along the border who live in Mexico but study in California schools, with legal residency or citizenship in the U.S. California authorities are sure to exert more pressure for preventing such students from attending public schools near the border, on the basis of Proposition 187.

In conclusion, Prop 187 reaffirms and deepens a segregationist tendency already existing throughout the United States and, in the specific arena of higher education, it may bring greater demand on the Mexican side of the border. Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education states that sufficient educational infrastructure—particularly at the higher-education level—exists to satisfy the demand that could be generated by students returning to Mexico.

Bernardo Méndez Lugo

negative arguments put forward by some politicians—among them Jesse Helms and Ross Perot—and trade-union leaders, as well as the obstacles and multiple oppositions presented in the U.S. Congress with the aim of preventing NAFTA's approval in late 1993.

We believe that the strengthening of Mexico's relationship with the Hispanic community in the U.S. was an important achievement by the Salinas administration. Mexico's government finally recognized the crucial role of the large U.S. Hispanic population, which is principally of Mexican origin, and the need to draw closer to it. According to the 1990 Census there are 22.6 million Hispanics in the U.S., 65% of them—that is, around 15 million—of Mexican origin. The projection is that by the year 2020 this population will constitute an absolute majority in California and Texas, which means it will have a great political potential, above all in those two states.

Despite the fact that there has always been an intense personal relationship between Mexicans in both countries, there was only a weak linkage between Mexico's institutions and Mexicans in the U.S., and negative stereotypes had moreover begun to develop on both sides of the border. The

Mexican government was conscious that only isolated projects were in place and that few meetings were held between the two nations' federal agencies. Almost everything was concentrated on the work of our consular representatives, who were mainly devoted to dealing with requests from our compatriots for defense against discriminatory acts in the labor and human-rights fields. Thus, through the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, then under the leadership of Fernando Solana, the government created the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, in 1990. The goal was to develop policies for communicating with and drawing closer to these communities.<sup>3</sup> This program has already promoted the creation of cultural institutes and centers, covering exchanges not only in the

<sup>3</sup> The program's main objectives are: improving links with the Mexican and Mexican-origin population in the United States through the development of concrete programs of mutual interest and benefit; promoting a better image of Mexican-Americans through adequate coverage of their struggles and achievements, as well as advancing knowledge of and respect for expressions of their culture; and favoring a better knowledge of Mexican reality among Mexican communities abroad (Roger Díaz de Cosío, "Los mexicanos en Estados Unidos: una política de acercamiento" [unpublished document], Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1994).



*Panoramic view of Tijuana.*

field of culture but also having to do with education, sports and multi-purpose community organizations.<sup>4</sup> At the same time the "Aztec Eagle" award was established, as the highest honor bestowed by the Mexican government on citizens of other countries. This is a manifestation of the respect and admiration Mexicans have towards Mexican-origin citizens who fight to build themselves a better future while preserving and disseminating our culture and defending our compatriots' rights in frequently hostile environments.<sup>5</sup>

This new activism on the part of the Mexican government became apparent with the beginning of the campaign for California's Proposition 187, in 1994. The protests that the Mexican government sent to U.S. officials, as well as countless protests undertaken by a large number of individuals and groups, were also manifestations of this new way in which our politics were becoming internationalized.

It should be stressed that this attitude was unprecedented, since one of Mexican foreign policy's basic principles has been non-intervention, and our traditional diplomats always considered that expressing an opinion against unilaterally-adopted measures constituted intervention.

During a ceremony held on August 13, 1994 in Los Angeles, California, then Deputy Foreign Minister Andrés Rozental gave a speech in which he stated, regarding Proposition 187: "... We recognize the domestic character of SOS [Save Our State]. We scrupulously adhere to the principle of non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs. But in this case, Mexicans feel directly affected and their government cannot avoid clearly expressing its categorical rejection and its commitment to work very closely with all those opposed to Proposition 187...."<sup>6</sup>

Shortly thereafter, "Yes on 187" coordinator Rick Oltman sent a letter to President Salinas requesting immediate clarification of the Mexican government's position on California's political processes in general and Proposition 187 in particular: "...The arguments put forward by Deputy Minister Andrés Rozental were highly offensive to us.... It

bothers us that an invitee to our country would seek to interfere in our electoral process.... Illegal immigration and foreign interference with our electoral process represent a threat to our sovereignty and will not be tolerated...."<sup>7</sup>

On behalf of the president, Minister of Foreign Relations Tello subsequently responded, clarifying that Rozental had offered only moral support—and not economic support, as had been reported—to those who were working against Proposition 187, as well as pledging to redouble efforts aimed at protecting Mexicans in California. Tello also noted: "the times have changed, and Mexico is more open to international scrutiny, and our new profile as NAFTA partners today obliges us to accept criticism in areas which until recently were considered attacks on our sovereignty." He also cited the presence, during Mexico's recent national elections, of international—mainly U.S.—observers, who freely expressed their views on the electoral process and its results.<sup>8</sup>

We see this exchange of correspondence as an example of the changing attitude towards greater activism in defense of our interests, as a new way of pursuing policy abroad. It is not surprising that Mexico's government should be concerned over the passage of Proposition 187, given that this measure has generated an anti-Mexican attitude—as Mexican-American spokesmen repeatedly called it—and has been harmful to our compatriots, in addition to contributing another irritant to the already conflict-ridden bilateral relationship and a possible limitation to cooperation on an issue as delicate as migration has proven to be for both nations.

Finally, in line with this new framework of Mexican policy internationalization manifesting itself in greater activism, an audacious proposal was recently made to reform the Mexican Constitution (specifically articles 27, which prevents foreigners from owning properties in Mexico, and 37, relating to the concepts of citizenship and nationality) in order to make it possible to grant dual nationality.

This initiative, currently under discussion by Congress, would allow Mexican nationals residing legally abroad to adopt another nationality without having, *ipso facto*, to renounce their Mexican citizenship as the Constitution currently stipulates. While this proposal was recently introduced by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in 1982 the 90,000-member One Stop Immigration and Educational Centers, Inc. called for Mexicans to be able to obtain dual nationality. At that time, PRI supporters as well as various trade-union groups opposed this proposal, and even members of what is now the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) rejected it on the grounds that it would

<sup>4</sup> By early 1994 institutes and cultural centers had already been created in 14 U.S. cities: Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago, Denver, Fresno, Miami, Houston, New York, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Jose, San Diego and San Francisco. Institutions had previously been created in San Antonio and Washington (*ibid.*, p. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Among the outstanding individuals decorated with this award have been farmworkers' leader Cesar Chavez, the academician Julian Zamora and the folklorist Américo Paredes, in 1990. Over the following three years it was granted to writer Luis Leal, educator Blandina Cárdenas, attorney Antonia Hernandez, president of MALDEF (Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund)—an organization which over the years has won countless victories for Mexicans in the United States, Los Angeles County supervisor Gloria Medina and Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza (*ibid.*, p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> Remarks by Ambassador Andrés Rozental, Deputy Foreign Minister of Mexico, on the occasion of the ceremony awarding the Aztec Eagle to Luis Valdez and Baldemar Velazquez, Los Angeles, California; Mexico City, August 13, 1994; mimeographed.

<sup>7</sup> Rick Oltman, Letter to the Honorable Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Yes on 187-Save Our State, San Rafael, California, August 22, 1994; mimeographed.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Tello, Letter to Mr. Oltman; Mexico City, Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, September 20, 1994; mimeographed.



Héron Alemán / Imagenlatina.

*Deportees return to Tijuana. Immigration is a "revolving door."*

involve serious modifications of the Constitution. Today, PRD supporters not only support the proposal but go further, advocating dual citizenship.

It is worth noting that in contrast to Mexican law, U.S. legislation and jurisprudence allow citizens to have dual nationality without their necessarily losing it as a result of participating in another country's elections.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike citizenship, nationality does not involve such rights as voting or occupying elected public office. Citizenship is directly related to the place where an individual lives and pays taxes, and can be the same as, or different from, nationality. We believe this proposal has arisen at this time in response to the prevailing anti-immigrant atmosphere in the United States, principally in California, which encourages discrimination and violations of the human and labor rights of our compatriots.

The view is that our compatriots living in the United States have ambivalent feelings, and sometimes resist becoming U.S. citizens because that would necessarily involve renouncing Mexican citizenship. It should not be forgotten that they are victimized by constant changes in administrative stipulations, which have led to a fear that if

they do renounce their nationality it will be impossible or extremely difficult to regain it.<sup>10</sup>

The dual-nationality initiative is important in light of its double purpose, to benefit the interests of our compatriots in particular and Mexico in general. Dual nationality would allow Mexicans abroad to freely and legally demand and exercise their social, civil and juridical rights. As members of Mexican-origin communities, they would be able to exert greater political influence in all fields for the defense of their interests, which —up to the present— have been very weakly represented, above all in the United States, despite these communities' demographic and economic weight.

At the same time, with the pride of possessing dual nationality, these communities would be able to identify themselves as Mexican and to act as a pressure group in favor of Mexico's interests, exercising their influence on U.S. society and government. Thus, we believe this initiative to be of the utmost importance, and that it may be opportune to establish a bilateral agreement on dual nationality. This would be based on the framework of the positive spirit of cooperation between the two countries over the past years; and would at the same time tend to cut against the highly negative anti-immigrant atmosphere currently prevailing in the United States. **M**

<sup>9</sup> "En EU, válida la doble nacionalidad desde 1967: Schuk" (*La Jornada*, April 16, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Mexican legislation states that one can regain nationality after renouncing it in order to acquire nationality elsewhere (Roberta Lajous, "Doble nacionalidad," *Reforma*, April 17, 1995).