

A U.S. Congressional Perspective on North America, Interview with U.S. Representative Henry Cuellar

by ROBERT A. PASTOR*

From Laredo, Texas, Dr. Henry Cuellar was elected to Congress in 2004 after serving 14 years in the Texas State Legislature and as secretary of state of Texas. He is a member of the House Homeland Security Committee and is senior whip in the Democratic Caucus. The congressman received his BA from Georgetown University and a law degree and a PhD in government from the University of Texas in Austin.

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In the broadest sense, can you see a “North America” and, if so, what does it look like? Can you see a relationship between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada that is different from what it is today?

Henry Cuellar (HC): I certainly see a different relationship between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada than what we have now. Politically, I think people are afraid of what they call a “union.” There are a lot of advantages to a better partnership in sharing information and changing the laws so that things work better between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. We certainly understand some of the difficulties but, if we don’t get started now to solve those problems, it is going to hurt us in the long run.




Many people point to NAFTA as the economic foundation of an emerging North America and, by dismantling trade and investment barriers in 13 years, NAFTA more than tripled trade and quadrupled

* Dr. Robert A. Pastor is director of the Center for North American Studies and professor of international relations at American University, Washington, D.C.


foreign direct investment among the three countries. Do you think NAFTA was good? Did it benefit the U.S. and its neighbors?

HC: Without a doubt, it benefited our countries. I'm from Laredo, Texas, the largest land-port we have in the southern United States. We have seen our side of the border transformed because of trade due to the primary and secondary jobs created there. On a first-hand basis, I've seen the transformation. Were there winners and losers? Certainly, I don't think anyone can doubt that. If you can have adjustment assistance for those folks that might have had been negatively affected, then we should have that between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

 If NAFTA was good, then what is missing now? What should we be doing to build on that foundation?

HC: NAFTA basically dealt with the lowering of customs barriers and focused on trade. There are other economic areas where we can share between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. I wish we could work on infrastructure in ways that would help all three countries. I wish we could work on certain health initiatives within the three countries. For example, we can look at tele-medicine to rural areas in all three countries. I would like to focus on ways where we could improve international education. I know American University does a good job at exchanges of not only students but more professors and joint programs between universities in Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.

There is a fear out there, though, evoked recently on the House floor. A member said that no Department of Transportation funds should be used to promote programs between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. It was overwhelmingly passed. I voted against it. Some people would prefer to put up walls and fences instead of talking to each other.

 Why have highways become controversial? If you trade, you need roads.

HC: You cannot trade unless you have the right infrastructure, whether it's bridges or highways like I-35 to Dallas or I-59 to Houston. Seventy-five to eighty percent of all trade into the U.S. from Mexico is through roads and at least 50 percent of traffic in Laredo is trade. To paint you a clear

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picture, Laredo sees a convoy of trucks that spans 170 miles past San Antonio on a daily basis. That's an incredibly expansive amount of traffic. If you don't have the right infrastructure to facilitate this activity, you can get to one part and be stopped in the middle on the international boundary. Texas built this beautiful Colombia Bridge with all the connections, but there was no connection on the Mexican side other than a dirt road. The infrastructure is so important. If you don't have it, you can't move goods.



Why don't your colleagues see that?

HC: There is a lot of misinformation out there. There are a lot of talk shows on radio and TV that are good at getting out sensational messages. We saw that in immigration reform; we've seen that on the issue of building a fence as if it's so simple for a fence to stop illegal immigration. There are talk shows and radio shows that present one side and they shape American opinion.



Why aren't there more leaders in the administration or in the House and Senate that articulate this vision for North America and the obvious need for infrastructure to cope with the expansion of trade?

HC: I don't know but I agree that more are needed. I filed a piece of legislation that allows the U.S. to provide assistance to Mexico in different areas. One is to fight the drug war in Mexico; that will have an impact. But, also, social and economic investment that will help build roads. Helping them create roads will impact other issues, for example, that will create jobs over there and, hopefully, mean that fewer people will be trying to come into the United States. We provide billions in foreign aid but, when it comes to providing aid to a neighbor and a huge trading partner, people will come up with excuses.

For example, they'll say there is corruption down there. But is that to say other countries we provide money to do not have issues of corruption or transparency? There is a sort of bias that we need to be cognizant of and need to address.



Would it help if Canada were at the table? Would it help if in discussing border issues there was a third party that would permit greater balance in the discussions and greater focus on rules rather than paternalism and power?

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HC: Strategically, that would be a smart way of negotiating. Right now, there are certain biased ways of looking at Mexico. As in the case of NAFTA, Canada was brought in and [it] brought a different perspective.



Would it help if there were institutions, like a North American Commission, that put forth a proposal, for example, on North American infrastructure and transportation that could evoke responses from the three governments?

HC: I think it would help the debate and raise awareness and a new level to the debate. We need a catalyst to getting this started; your proposals and ideas are things we definitely need to look at.



What about border security? Would having the Canadians in the discussions make things easier or harder? Would there be more innovation?

HC: I think it would help. If you look at the Secure Fence Act that was passed a year ago, it called for 700 miles of fence in the southern United States and, in the northern U.S., it called for a study to see if the fence should be built. That is an uneven piece of legislation. The Canadians would say: what about the economic impact or the environmental concerns or access to natural resources? There would have been more debate because all three countries would have been involved, like NAFTA. Three countries would come together to improve education, healthcare, trade, whatever the issue. Tactically, it is a better approach to have all three countries at the table.



Did you anticipate the evolution of the debate on immigration?

HC: Coming from Laredo, a border town, immigration has always been an issue to me. If you look at the history of immigration reform, it's always been emotional in the U.S. and it has always been about different ethnic groups. Immigration is not unique to the U.S. It happens across the world but it becomes unique when it affects *us* as a country. I was hoping that the hard part of reform would have been in the House debate but the Senate had a hard time getting it done. The concern is that, the closer you get to the presidential election, the less chance you have of getting

it passed. There are a lot of forces, talk shows on radio and TV, that push a viewpoint that shape American opinion.



How can one build a coalition that favors a different, more respectful way to approach our neighbors?

HC: It's difficult. We need different champions in the House and Senate that have similar thinking to you. If we don't have champions, then a new North America is not going to emerge.



Maybe we need one of the presidential candidates to articulate such a vision.

HC: As you know, presidential candidates do help shape and define the debate. It would be great to see one of them start that dialogue.



Which one?

HC: All of them should engage in this dialogue. I have my own biases; I'm a Clinton supporter.




Should there be a sense of community between the three nations of North America? Would relations improve if they weren't just two bilateral relationships? How do we structure the debate so that the idea of North America becomes logical and persuasive for a wider population?


HC: Strategically, the leaders in the countries must talk as though part of a community. If we replicate the discussions of NAFTA, that would help us. There is fear in some communities and in some members of Congress that there will be an overarching government that supersedes the U.S. government. There is an individualistic thing in America that opposes the United Nations or a super-government.

But it's not about that. It's about how we create a partnership where three countries can better interact to improve education, healthcare, infrastructure, and trade between the countries.


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 What advice would you give to the president of Mexico and the prime minister of Canada about how they can deal more effectively with the United States? Is it in their interests to collaborate with each other more and pursue a “North American option” or should they just deal directly with the United States?

HC: Our nation’s neighbors must be willing to collaboratively engage the United States on matters of mutual interest along the borders as well as on issues of transnational policy. I think that there needs to be a balance between the lens through which our neighbors view interactions solely with the United States and those which involve the continent as a whole; there is not one single strategy that would best fit the multitude of diverse issues that the three countries have before them.

 If the president were to put you in charge of “fixing” the border, what would you do?

HC: First and foremost, I would address the border security and infrastructural needs of the border. For many years, the border regions of the United States have not been provided the resources necessary to keep pace with their growing importance to the nation in the areas of trade, culture, and security. As I have seen in my home town of Laredo, there has been an ever-increasing flow of commerce through the city as the trade relationship between United States and other nations has grown, but the infrastructure necessary to accommodate this trade has not kept pace. Addressing our borders’ fundamental needs will produce tremendous benefit not only to the U.S. border regions but will, as well, improve the prosperity, security, and a multitude of other pressing issues that presently face our nation.

 What message has the United States –as a nation– been sending to Mexico and Canada, and what message should we be sending?

HC: I believe that the message that the United States has been sending in recent years has been a mixed one. On the one hand, our diplomatic efforts speak to a desire to work in partnership with our neighbors but, on the other hand, we have seen efforts to distance and disengage the United States from its place in North American affairs, including through

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the construction of a border fence, which sends a multitude of complex signals to our neighbors. I believe that the United States must pursue a relationship with its neighbors that places first the interests of Americans as to benefit and strengthen our nation but which does so in a manner that responsibly recognizes and accommodates the unique relationship that we have with Canada and Mexico.