



Alfonso Caraveo/Colef

Patricia Galeana*

The Border between Mexico And the United States

Relations between neighbors are always a foreign policy priority, even though they are also often conflictive. For historical and cultural reasons, relations between Mexico and the United States are even more complex because the two countries are the border between Latin and Anglo America and personify the clash between two antagonist cultures: the first, Catholic and idealistic, the other, Protestant and pragmatic.

As the Latin American border, Mexico had to contend with U.S. expansionist ambitions and its imperialist eagerness to occupy the place that Spain had held in the hemisphere.

Due to its being the border between the two realities as a result of the territorial conquest in which Mexico

was deprived of more than half its territory, mutual relations have been tense, with more clashes than coincidences. Along a 3 117-kilometer border, one of the world's longest, conflicts have been a constant. By 1823, establishing military outposts along our border with the United States to protect our national territory had already been proposed; that proposal was repeated in 1837, 1840, 1846, and 1848.

After multiple failed attempts to purchase Mexican land, President James Polk lied to the U.S. Congress to obtain authorization to invade our country. He sent troops south of the border and said that U.S. blood had been spilled on U.S. soil, a lie that was debunked by Abraham Lincoln himself.

The 1846 U.S. invasion of Mexico included a nine-month occupation of its capital and led to the loss of more than one-half the country's territory, to thousands of compa-

* Full-time professor at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters College of History; www.patriciagaleana.net.

triot's losing their nationality or their property. This left an indelible scar on the citizenry.

The group of moderates responsible for the negotiations on that occasion signed a peace agreement convinced that if they did not settle, the entire country would be lost. The U.S. "All Mexico" annexationist movement was very strong. However, racism defeated the idea because some considered the Mexican population to be a mix of many peoples and therefore, their degradation. Plus, they argued, Mexicans had been evangelized by the corrupt Church of Rome.

On February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits, and Settlement between the United States of America and the Republic of Mexico, better known as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was signed. With this treaty, Mexico lost Texas, New Mexico, and Upper California, making up what today are the U.S. states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, and parts of Wyoming, Nebraska, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado. In compensation for damages incurred, Mexico was to receive Mex\$15 million, which were never fully paid.

This treaty continues to be in effect, although with modifications. However, it was not a definitive solution to the border. The only part that fully complied with was the part that affected Mexico, that is, the loss of 2.4 million square kilometers of land. The articles that contravened U.S. government interests were not respected or were simply rescinded. The guarantees to the rights of Mexicans who remained in the annexed territory, stipulated in Article VIII, were not respected either.

Measures were taken to benefit our neighbor to the north: in New Mexico, Mexican citizens were forced to take on U.S. citizenship because their labor was required. In contrast, in California, with the Gold Rush, they were thrown off their lands and even lynched. Forays of nomadic indigenous tribes into Mexican territory were also not prevented, as stipulated in Article XI; these incursions continued, pushing local residents off their lands and forcing them to live further and further south. The agreed-upon neutrality to stop the entry of filibusters, adventurers intent upon setting up their own states, was never put into practice, and the complaints lodged by Mexicans were ignored. Pressure was brought to bear, however, to deal expediently with those presented by U.S. Americans.

After the war, since the peace treaty did not include either the Baja California peninsula or the Isthmus of

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Tehuantepec, expansionist pressure continued. In 1848, Mexico considered militarizing the border in self-defense.

During the last administration of General Antonio López de Santa Anna, in 1853, the United States once again pressed to acquire Mexican land, which would again be diminished through the Treaty of Mesilla, concluding the Gadsden Purchase that the United States wanted to ensure the building of its transcontinental railway. To that effect, it mobilized troops along the border as a threat.

Through this treaty, Mexico lost an additional 100 000 square kilometers in territory, affecting the states of Sonora and Chihuahua. In addition, the United States was relieved of the obligation of stopping incursions of nomadic indigenous tribes into Mexico, and free passage was given to U.S. ships along the Gulf of California and the Colorado River.

The Treaty of Mesilla's Article VIII specified that a specific treaty would be drawn up to deal with the passage of persons, merchandise, and troops along the road that would be built on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This left open the possibility that the United States could "protect" the works if it considered it in its interest. It should be pointed out that it was not until 1937, during the administration of Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas, when Francisco Castillo Nájera was ambassador of Mexico in the United States, that this article was rescinded.

The sale of the La Mesilla Valley was Santa Anna's downfall: he was brought down and accused of treason. This legal instrument concluded the period of land-grabbing, but not of problems along the border.

In 1870, the United States militarized the border as a result of Apache invasions, and Porfirio Díaz ordered that his troops repel any incursion. After the Mexican Revolution broke out, William Taft sent 20 000 men to the border and to Mexico's ports in 1911. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson occupied the port of Veracruz by force from April to November, under the pretext of preventing shipments of German arms sent to the Huerta dictatorship. From March

1916 to February 1917, Washington sent a “punitive expedition” that rose to as many as 10 000 soldiers, all to seek out Francisco Villa. However, they failed and the U.S. troops left Mexico on February 5, 1917.

When the United States entered World War I, they forcibly drafted Mexican citizens, who were sent to the front even though Mexico had declared its neutrality in the conflict.

In addition, in 1924, the United States created a border patrol to combat Chinese immigration and smuggling; from then until now the military has mobilized innumerable times in the area. Let us review the most recent cases.

In 1986, Ronald Reagan deployed his military alliance against drug trafficking operation. In 1994, President William Clinton staged Operation Guardian and built a wall along the border between Tijuana and California. One of the most highly publicized cases of people murdered in this campaign was that of Esequiel Hernández, a young U.S. citizen who was herding his family’s goats and was killed by a Marine patrol in 1997.

Since September 11, 2001, security measures have toughened up. In 2006, George W. Bush sent 6 000 National Guard troops to support the Border Patrol to complement the legislation that ordered the construction of a double wall along several stretches of the border.

In 2010, President Barack Obama sent 1 200 National Guardsmen to surveil the border in light of increased violence linked to drug trafficking.

In April 2018, Donald Trump announced that he would send between 2 000 and 4 000 more troops to reinforce the area and stop Central American migrants from enter-

ing the country. It should be pointed out that migration to the U.S. has dropped considerably during the current administration.

Another issue that creates conflict in bilateral relations has been the changing course of rivers, whereby nature has favored our neighbor to the north. Salinity in the Colorado River, polluted by waste since the nineteenth century, has also been an important problem.

One of the few circumstances that favor Mexico in our relations with the U.S. has been the recovery of the 2.43 square kilometers in an area called El Chamizal; when the river changed course, this area had been left on the U.S. side. After a century of complaints, initiated by President Benito Juárez, and an international decision handed down in favor of Mexico (which the United States refused to recognize), on June 18, 1963, the land was recovered. The administrations of Presidents Adolfo López Mateos and John F. Kennedy signed the agreement returning the land to Mexico.

Although it has had a tragic history, since we cannot change our border, we must remember Benito Juárez’s words: “It’s enough not to be your neighbor’s enemy.”


As Andrés Molina Enríquez, the author of *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (The Great National Problems), wrote, “We can undoubtedly only retain our national dignity” living near the world’s first military power “as long as our society is strong.”¹ **MM**


Notes


¹ Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (Mexico City: Imprenta de A. Carranza e hijos, 1909), p. 357.


www.cisan.unam.mx


 unamcisan@facebook.com

 @cisanunam

 cisanunam.blogspot.mx/

 cisanunamweb

 cisan_unam

 <http://ru.micisan.unam.mx/>

