Myths and [mis] perceptions

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Few neighboring countries are as diverse as Mexico and the United States. Their differences are not merely economic. The two countries also have widely divergent worldviews, the products of dramatically different histories. Following World War II, the United States emerged as a global superpower, the center of an unprecedented network of riches and influence. Mexico, meanwhile, remained virtually unchanged—an insular society locked in its own reality and dominated by an authoritarianism that regulated day-to-day existence and interpreted the past, present, and future to suit its own ends.

In line with Mexico's worldview, nationalism and the border served as barriers against encroaching foreigners who sought to exploit the country's natural and spiritual wealth. But more, they demarcated the arena outside of which Mexicans were not to air their country's many problems. The most dangerous foreign presence, of course, was the United States, with its long history of aggression against Mexico. But because there was little Mexico could do against such a powerful neighbor, the national attitude became one of entrenched indifference.

One of the many consequences of this state of affairs was that most Mexicans knew very little about the United States. For someone like myself, growing up in Jalisco, "el Norte" was a contradictory and mysterious territory, idealized by migrant workers returning laden with electronic equipment and exaggerated tales of the United States.

At the time I began my studies at the Colegio de México in the early 1970s, the first serious cracks were appearing in the political system Mexico had inherited from its revolution. A wide range of groups was struggling to shake off the mantle of authoritarianism, while President Luis Echeverría criss-crossed the country preaching his vision of an independent Mexico and reminding us of the inherently perfidious nature of foreign countries, especially the United States.

Realizing how profoundly ignorant Mexicans were of the United States and catalyzed by the teaching of Josefina Vázquez, Lorenzo Meyer, and Mario Ojeda, I determined to do postgraduate work on the exotic topic of the United States. My central question was how
much Mexico’s proximity to this superpower had conditioned its economy, its political system, and its relationship with other countries of the world. Although I was well aware of the United States’ long history of aggressiveness toward Mexico, I wondered whether the nature of the U.S. threat to Mexican sovereignty had ever varied. That is, if the United States was engaged in a permanent conspiracy against Mexico, what was the nature and thrust of its instruments over time?

These questions took me to the School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, where I soon learned there were no quick and easy answers. Although some U.S. natives did fit the caricature of the arrogant gringo, many—far more than I would have imagined—did not. I was surprised to discover that most were relatively unconcerned about Mexico. All of their energies were absorbed by a collective psychodrama of mutual recrimination and self-doubt about their past and their future. This was the state of the United States after Vietnam, after Watergate, after waves of demonstrations by students and minorities, and after marijuana and acid rock had turned the new generation against this materialist industrial and interventionist society.

Against this backdrop, I wrote a doctoral thesis on how the U.S. elite perceived Mexico following World War II. My reasoning was that if I could understand how they viewed Mexico, I could also comprehend the nature of their hostility and perhaps help Mexico develop more effective lines of defense. I was still blissfully ignorant of the many pitfalls that bedevil anyone pretentious enough to think he or she can fully understand the ideas and consciousness of a society as complex as the United States.

Although I obtained my degree in 1984, thirteen years would pass before I considered this work ready for publication. During this time, I explored other fields of knowledge while the world, the United States, and Mexico were transformed. In 1990, Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s administration informed the Mexican population that their country had shifted course: proximity to the United States would no longer be considered a misfortune, but rather a golden opportunity for Mexico to penetrate world markets, overcome its economic crisis, and advance toward social justice and (perhaps) democracy. Mexico duly entered the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

But just as Mexico seemed poised to join the ranks of First World countries, a rebellion broke out in Chiapas in January 1994. And in December of that year, Mexico was plunged into a major economic crisis that only exacerbated its already dramatic dependence on the United States. Concurrent with these events, Mexican society—and Mexico’s political system—began to change. The midterm elections of
July 1997 suggest that the conditions for an accelerated transition to a
democratic regime may finally be in place.

Despite these transformations, gaining an enhanced understanding of how Mexico is perceived by the United States, and of the nature and extent of U.S. influence, remains fundamentally important to Mexico. And this fact created a dilemma I did not anticipate when I began my studies. Over the years I had developed friendships and close professional relationships with U.S. colleagues whose work I cite in this volume. Should I follow the course set by Raymond Vernon who, in *The Dilemmas of Mexican Development*, omitted the names of Mexicans whose ideas contributed to his work, because some of them might be "ashamed to find themselves associated with conclusions that they did not share"? Or should I follow the practice of Judith Hellman who, in her preface to *Mexico in Crisis*, stated that she would "report on things just as they were, . . . without fear of offending my very dear Mexican friends, because even they would want me to write about these matters in a manner as objective and revealing as possible"? I chose the latter option, and it is this spirit that informs the present volume: with all possible objectivity and rigor, I explore the manner in which government officials, scholars, and journalists have written about Mexico, pointing out success and failure, truth and myth.

This book goes beyond my original intentions. As I became increasingly aware of the evolution of U.S. perceptions and the impact of ideas on reality, I was also able to reinterpret certain aspects of Mexico’s recent history. In this process, I confirmed, adjusted, or put to rest a number of myths about Mexico, Mexicans, and the role of the United States in Mexico’s recent history. Despite the inherent difficulty of uprooting well-established beliefs, I am pleased with the accomplishment: nothing could be more harmful, particularly in the present period of redefinition and transition, than to continue misleading ourselves about what we were and what we are.

Over the years, I have incurred a series of debts, and I am at last able to express publicly my thanks to some of the people and institutions that have made this work possible. The book began as a doctoral thesis presented to SAIS at Johns Hopkins University, where my studies were financed by grants from Mexico’s Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) and the Institute of International Education, which awards the “Lincoln-Juárez” scholarships—in addition to support from SAIS itself.

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An indirect though critical influence was my experience as a columnist for La Jornada. One of my most important sources was journalistic material, and my active participation in establishing this newspaper and continuing as a contributing writer for over twelve years gave me a better understanding of the sometimes neurotic but always creative passion involved in the elusive search for objectivity under the inexorable pressure of deadlines. My learning experiences in this vein continued when, in 1996, I moved to another great newspaper, Reforma, where I continue to write a weekly column that is carried by fifteen other Mexican dailies. Another extremely important influence, especially for certain chapters, was the ideas and the spirit of colleagues and friends at the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, Alianza Cívica, and many other organizations that have contributed to the unfinished adventure of building a just and democratic Mexico.

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