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.

The process of transforming the dissertation into a book manuscript was eased by support from many individuals and institutions. The directors of the Center for International Studies at the Colegio de México have patiently witnessed the evolution of this book. They are, chronologically, Lorenzo Meyer, Rafael Segovia, Blanca Torres, Sole-
dad Loaeza, Ilán Bizberg (whose enthusiasm and generosity were crucial through the final stage), and Celia Toro, all of whom were unfailingly generous in their support. The book also gained from input from colleagues and friends at the Colegio de México: Jorge Padua, Manuel García y Griego, Gustavo Vega, and the Academic Computing Services division. Special thanks are due to Bernardo Mabire and Lorenzo Meyer, who read the final draft and made many useful suggestions. I also benefited from the support of Diana and Mario Bronfman, Laura Mues, and Julio Sotelo.

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.

In the United States, I would like to acknowledge the encouragement I received from Riordan Roett, Bruce Bagley, Piero Gleijeses, and Ekkehart Kripendorff at John Hopkins University, as well as the support of Wayne Cornelius, who in 1981 provided me with a much needed tranquil space in which to work at the Center for U.S.–Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego, of which he was the founding director. Kevin Middlebrook, the Center’s second director, gave the text a careful reading and provided a timely stimulus. And Ruth Adams, a dear friend, provided an example of vitality in the exploration of new ideas.

Vital financial support from a number of U.S. institutions allowed me to comb archives and carry out interviews, in addition to underwriting some of the book’s costs. My deepest thanks to the Mexican office of the Ford Foundation and to two programs of the John T. and Catherine MacArthur Foundation: the Program on Peace and International Cooperation, administered by the Social Science Research Council, and the Research and Writing Program of the Program on Peace and International Cooperation. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation also contributed, through the Colegio de México’s Center for International Studies. The manuscript’s final draft was begun at
the New School for Social Research, where I received the support and encouragement of Judith Friedlander and Aristide Zolberg.

I would also like to thank those who participated directly in locating, organizing, and coding information: Mónica Guadalupe Mora, Betty Strom, Blanca María Jouliá, Noel Thomas, and particularly Yolanda Argüello and Laura Valverde. The proofing and correction of many drafts was deftly handled by Patricia Bourdon and Virginia Arellano. In the final stages, Doris Arnez Torrez and particularly Fernando Ramírez Rosales contributed much-valued enthusiasm and professionalism. Mrs. Antonia Fierro Mota gave me both affection and food throughout my months of isolation in Tepec, Morelos, and became the confidante of my silences. Cristina Antúnez gave me support in resolving some computer problems. The book’s swift publication in English is due to the professionalism of Sandra del Castillo. Julián Brody Pellicer contributed the passion and intelligence of an artist-translator.

But I have reserved my most special acknowledgments for four individuals. The first is Miguel Acosta, who carried out one of the most arduous—though fascinating—aspects of this research with enormous diligence, responsibility, and cheerfulness. Together we mastered the methods of content analysis. And to the others I dedicate this book—to my wife, Eugenia, and to my very dear children, Cristina and Andrés, whose long-running skepticism and good humor are now finally rewarded with this publication. To them, at last, I can say, “believe it or not, it’s finally finished.”