Myths and [mis] perceptions

Aguayo, Sergio, Brody, Julián

Published by El Colegio de México

Aguayo, Sergio and Julián Brody.
Myths and [mis] perceptions: changing U.S. elite visions of Mexico.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/74484.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/74484

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2577753
In order to appreciate fully the nature of U.S. perceptions of Mexico during the Cold War, we must bear in mind an idea that permeated the United States following World War II: that the United States had become the “most powerful nation in the world, in economic, military, and moral terms” (JIC 1946: 1). Although the claim of primacy in moral terms has been challenged by analysts from a wide range of ideologies, the United States was unquestionably the world leader both economically and militarily.

At the end of the war and for the first time in history, there was a single truly global power. In 1945, the United States produced 40 percent of the world’s goods and held a monopoly on atomic power, at a time when most traditional powers were prostrate. Woodrow Wilson’s vision of an international order wholly favorable to the United States, able to stave off another Great Depression, appeared to be at last within reach.\textsuperscript{1} It is not surprising that the notion of an imminent “American Century” enjoyed widespread popularity.

According to this vision, the majority of nations should embrace a capitalist economy and a liberal political system; international conflicts should be resolved by the newly created United Nations; and the United States should play a key role in international affairs in order to preclude the emergence of hostile powers that could potentially dominate Europe, because any change in the balance of world power would be to the detriment of the United States.

\textsuperscript{1}This vision informed President Roosevelt’s Atlantic Charter.
Then came the disintegration of the United States’ relationship with the Soviet Union, and U.S. euphoria turned to anxiety. The process was swift. As late as July 1945, the Soviet Union was favorably portrayed in *Life* magazine; a few months later, the Soviets had become the foremost threat to the United States and to the values that sustained its worldview. Driving this change in attitude were the deteriorating situation in Central Europe, where Communist allies of the Soviet Union had seized power; the civil war in Greece; gathering tensions in Turkey and Iran; and the possibility of Communist parties coming to power in France and Italy. The Soviet Union’s first nuclear tests, in August 1949—closely followed by the Chinese Communists’ occupation of Peking in October—did nothing to alleviate the mounting tension.

The mood of the times was captured in a number of documents—reports by presidential adviser Averell Harriman, a series of telegrams from Moscow drafted by a young diplomat named George Kennan, and an article by Kennan (signing as “Mr. X”) published in *Foreign Affairs*—maintaining that Russia had always harbored expansionist tendencies and that the Soviet Union was perpetuating this tradition by exporting its ideology and dictatorial system to Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. The expansion of Communism was viewed as a serious threat by the United States, whose security depended on a world favorable to liberal institutions and capitalist economies. The solution, according to Kennan (1947), was to “contain” Communism and the Soviet Union, and this was to be a guiding principle in U.S. foreign policy over the next forty years (LaFeber 1976).

Under this policy of containment, the world was divided into good and evil, locked in merciless conflict without limits or frontiers. To contain Communism, and to extend U.S. power and influence around the world, new institutions were created and old ones were adapted to fit the way that international relations would be organized in the second half of the twentieth century. Mechanisms dating from this era include the Central Intelligence Agency, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Most of the principles guiding U.S. actions throughout this period were set down on paper. In April 1950, the Departments of State and Defense prepared a report for the National Security Council that elaborated upon the dualistic Manichean logic of containment: the world’s nations must choose freedom or slavery. Slavery was represented, of course, by the Soviet Union, which, according to this same document, sought to “impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.” As the main defense against Soviet designs, the United
States must act on every front and in every way to oppose the threat (NSC 1954: 54).

In true Hollywood style, good and evil faced off in a deadly struggle that could end only with the destruction of one or the other adversary. Although the Communists certainly were hostile to the United States and its espoused system, Americans amplified the magnitude of the Soviet threat, nourishing a state of paranoia in which analyses combined truth and fantasy.

In the resulting climate of anxiety, fear, and hatred, politicians vied with one another to produce the most apocalyptic version of the Soviet and Communist “problem” (Freeland 1975). Joseph McCarthy dedicated his meteoric career to denouncing the “monstrous conspiracy” that had infiltrated America’s institutions. The senator from Wisconsin reasoned that, given the United States’ awesome might and exceptional character, Communist advances could only be explained by treasonous betrayals on the part of U.S. intellectuals and government officials. A true patriot’s duty lay in exposing these traitors and expelling them from their institutions.

McCarthy’s proposals had far-reaching impacts on the producers and transmitters of ideas. The McCarthyite witch-hunts proved devastating for the production of knowledge and for fundamental civil rights. Tolerance waned while conservative ideologies triumphed over liberalism, leading worldviews to the right (LaFeber and Polenberg 1975: 316-17). The fact that the hysteria of McCarthyism prevailed as a global worldview was almost wholly attributable to society’s continued acceptance of its leaders’ interpretation of reality. The people of the United States, believing that their nation’s security was truly at risk, willingly left foreign relations in the hands of the established elite, who, in turn, were free to act without restraint, secure in the knowledge that few would question their decisions.

**JOURNALISM DURING THE COLD WAR**

The U.S. media adopted the era’s schematic notion of reality, either through true conviction or from fear of conservative coercion. It was an era of “intense collaboration between the press and the government, which led the former to ignore its social responsibility: to keep watch on the latter.” The media avoided any “searching examination [of U.S.] foreign policy and the basic assumptions that underlie it” (Abrams 1981). Containing Communism was given priority over individual guarantees and objectivity. When Allen Dulles was named director of the CIA in 1953, “one of his first steps was to explore the possibilities for a close working partnership with the press [because] the news media could help the intelligence community in two impor-
tant ways: intelligence collection, and propaganda." Dulles believed that "cooperation with the government was, for the journalists like any other citizen, the patriotic thing to do" (Loch Johnson 1989: 183–84). And the press cooperated: the call of government authority proved stronger than the call of social responsibility.

The United States' attempts to overthrow Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz exemplify the obsessions and understandings that linked the government and the press. With few exceptions, the U.S. media backed the campaign against the Guatemalan government, accepting the official argument that this was a Communist regime and that it threatened the security of the United States (NYT, June 5, 1955; Galloway 1953). The Times was no exception; its editors acquiesced to a petition from the Department of State and withdrew Sidney Gruson, a correspondent covering the Guatemalan affair, at a crucial moment in the CIA-coordinated campaign against Arbenz (Salisbury 1980: 478–82; author interview with Gruson, 1983). In effect, the media contributed to the overthrow of a legitimate government and to the installation of a military regime that was to become one of Latin America's gravest violators of human rights (Loory 1974).

Although a solid consensus prevailed in the field of foreign policy, internal issues received different treatments in the conservative and liberal media. The conservative press was a staunch defender of anti-Communist dogma and saw the need to combat the enemy free of distracting moral considerations. This is apparent in Henry R. Luce's Time-Life or the Chicago Tribune, which supported Senator McCarthy's crusade against Communist infiltration in the United States, publishing a series of anti-Communist articles written by Willard Edwards in 1950. The Los Angeles Times also adopted a hard-line conservatism, harshly criticizing "foreign influences . . . socialism and labor unions and Communism and public housing" (Halberstam 1980: 76, 113, 138–57; Wendt 1979: 691–94).

The liberal press, which also backed government efforts to construct a "credible bulwark in Western Europe against the Soviet Union and Communism," nonetheless preserved a liberal attitude regarding internal affairs (Bray 1980: 8; Halberstam 1980: 182–201). The New York Times defended Americans' right to think differently and protested the violations of "individual civil liberties and freedoms that the newspaper had so clearly espoused for years on its editorial page" (Halberstam 1980: 239). Even so, the Times community, according to one of its chroniclers, lived through a "strange, awkward, embarrassing time . . . one of suspicion and conflict, anger and compassion" (Talese 1969: 237). This atmosphere would significantly color U.S. notions of Mexico during the Cold War.
MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES' LOGIC

The United States' traditional aspirations for Mexico—stability, progress, and friendship—have changed little during the twentieth century. But the circumstances of the Cold War significantly decreased the amount of attention that the U.S. elite paid to Mexico and changed perceptions of that country as well. Mexico scarcely figures in the period's key U.S. security documents regarding Latin America (see, for example, NSC 1949, 1953a; DOS 1952). The United States Continental Defense Plan of 1949—a very important military document—comprises fifty typed pages; Mexico, tightly controlled by an authoritarian, well-entrenched government with strong nationalistic tendencies, merits only seven lines in those pages. No more than twenty articles on Mexico appeared in U.S. military publications during the Cold War era; all dealt with historical issues. Interest in Mexican affairs within the U.S. military usually focused on histories or anecdotes from the Mexican War of 1846–1848. In modern Mexico, only Guadalajara, considered a "paradise" for retired American military personnel, proved to be of any interest.

This indifference was also reflected in academic publications on Mexico, which were scarce, confused, discontinuous, and of poor quality. The two most important texts from the late 1950s (Tucker 1957; Scott 1959) suffered from seriously flawed theoretical underpinnings, even if—as Roderic Camp believes—they led to a transition from an "essentially descriptive literature, to more critical analytical interpretations of political functions and their consequences" (1990a: 25). Travel guides, of which there were few, largely served to perpetuate an image of an enigmatic, unknown Mexico and did little to change U.S. attitudes (see Crow 1957; Rodman 1958).

Although Mexico was not a priority topic in Times articles, this did not imply a lack of interest. The Times maintained a permanent correspondent in Mexico, although most published pieces were brief and opinion pieces or major stories were very rare. Between 1946 and 1986 the Times published 3,080 short pieces (measuring less that 10 cm in column length), of which 44 percent (1,433) appeared between 1946 and 1959. Only six of the 114 opinion pieces on Mexico appearing during the forty-year period were published between 1946 and 1959 (see figure 7); these peaks of interest were related to the oil situation (1946–1947 and 1951–1954), Guatemala, and the Korean War.

This lack of interest reflected the United States' general satisfaction with the situation in Mexico: a stable regime in full control of the country, and a weak opposition. Although the Mexican government was authoritarian, centralized, and independent in foreign policy,  

---

1 It is mentioned in another eight lines, but in association with Canada.
2 For a more detailed analysis of the military literature, see Aguayo 1991.
Mexico was enjoying the benefits of stability and economic growth and that was good enough for the United States (SDN 1945; Cunningham 1984; Jordan and Taylor 1984; Ronfeldt 1983). Furthermore, the U.S. elite were convinced that Mexico would support the United States in any serious development. This certainty informs the Continental Defense Plan, for example. Two of the seven lines concerning Mexico reiterate a fundamental thesis, that “in case of war [or in any other critical situation] . . . Mexico would be an ally of the United States” (DA 1949: 1, 6).

This notion, which will figure largely in the present analysis, reappears in a number of documents that reflect the United States’ logic. John Foster Dulles, secretary of state during the Eisenhower administration, stated that “there is no room for doubt: in any crisis, Mexico would be on our side” (in Whitehead 1991: 330). In 1955, Ambassador Francis White observed, “if the Communists should force a showdown with us, Mexico would definitely be on our side” (DOS 1955: 2). An editorial in the Times concurred: “when a crisis arises we will stand side by side” (NYT 1953). In brief, the U.S. elite accepted Mexico as it was because, once the pros and cons had been taken into account, the status quo was favorable to U.S. interests.

Although the bilateral relationship has proved stable, the United States at the time had a number of concrete suggestions for Mexico. A military memorandum from 1955 reflects typical U.S. concerns; the memo’s priorities included: (1) persuading the Mexican elite to remove Communists from high-level government posts; (2) protecting strategic U.S. interests, ideally through further investment in Mexico’s oil industry; (3) discouraging the Mexican government from tendencies leading to “the nationalization of industries and State socialism”; and (4) establishing a close “relationship of cooperation between the two governments.” Persuasion continued to be the tool of choice: the U.S. elite believed that their “objectives could more readily be achieved by recognition by the Mexican government and people that Mexico’s national interests are best served by close military, economic, political, scientific and cultural cooperation with the United States” (DOS 1956: 5).

These ideas were the very foundation of U.S. perceptions of Mexico, which served to justify U.S. policies. As argued in following discussion of the different facets of the understanding, the relationship was not crafted solely by the United States. Mexico contributed as well.

---

1In 1951 the CIA stated that “The Mexican government [was] stable and in control over the political machinery” (CIA 1951: 63).

2This has been explicitly acknowledged by the CIA (CIA 1977: 8).