Myths and [mis] perceptions

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Presidential summits serve as a starting point for this discussion for two reasons: first, because the meetings between presidents of Mexico and the United States became regular events after World War II, and second, because the president is by far the most important element in the Mexican political system. An analysis of this presidential summitry will help uncover the relationship from the United States’ point of view, the distinct styles and personalities of the diverse actors involved, and the characteristics of the two nations’ respective political systems.

A CONGENIAL PRESIDENT

The U.S. elite has never underestimated the centrality of the Mexican president (whom Robert Scott identified as the “patron of the entire political system” (1959: 147). It is not surprising, therefore, that considerable U.S. efforts are expended to ascertain each Mexican president’s ideological orientation, personality, and feelings toward the United States.1

President Miguel Alemán (1946–1952) was one of the more popular Mexican presidents in the United States. He was praised 166 times—and criticized only once—in the pages of the Times during his six years in office. No other Mexican president has aroused such enthusiasm, although Carlos Salinas de Gortari also attained immense popularity in the United States. (The Salinas presidency has not been subjected to a content analysis as rigorous as Alemán’s.) There are certain obvious parallels between these two presidents’ regimes: both

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1The biographical and psychological profiles that U.S. intelligence services prepare on Mexico’s presidents confirm the richness of Washington’s information.
were praised by the United States for their policy orientation, and both excelled in deciphering the codes of American political culture.

Alemán's desire for friendly relations with U.S. elites was readily apparent; as a candidate, he visited the U.S. embassy to assure diplomats there of his ideological position. Not content with an improved private understanding, he also fed the voracious American ego (an unusual gesture for a Mexican politician); in an interview with the Times, then-candidate Alemán suggested that Mexican history would have been much smoother if our "first President had been a statesman of George Washington's caliber"—that is, if Mexico had been more like the United States. This comment was especially flattering in the early years of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were promoting divergent socioeconomic models.

Unlike their U.S. counterparts, Mexican politicians rarely allow the public a glimpse into their private lives. In his interview with the Times, Alemán broke with this tradition and discussed with journalist Anita Brenner some details of his rocky life history (his revolutionary father, who had been executed, and his impoverished childhood). His candor—combined with his acknowledged personal charm—captivated Brenner, who stated that the "rise of Miguel Alemán is the all-American legend: from newsboy to President, Mexican style." Alemán, paraded as an example of the American Dream, was described as honest, pragmatic, moderate, charming, and a true friend of the United States (Brenner 1946).

Americans are fond of reducing the history of societies to individual biographies. Thus Alemán became the young president who would transform Mexico into a "modern" country—prosperous, democratic, and friendly toward the United States. The United States wholeheartedly supported his project for the reorientation of Mexican life. (Later discussion will address how the U.S. elite chose to ignore all facts that contradicted the image they had concocted for Alemán.) Alemán's meetings with Truman (which were not unlike the warm exchanges between Carlos Salinas and George Bush that began in November 1988) were also crucial in shaping this image.

**TWO HISTORIC ENCOUNTERS**

A few months after being sworn in as president of Mexico, Miguel Alemán held two presidential summits whose real importance has yet to be fully appreciated. Hoping to cement the goodwill of the United States (an indispensable ingredient for his industrialization project), Alemán welcomed Harry Truman to Mexico in 1947 with a tumultu-
ous and enthusiastic reception. Alemán praised Truman as the “new champion of solidarity and understanding among the American peoples,” a noble leader, striving for the “cause of continued unity, independence, and justice . . . the greatest statesman produced so far by the United States” (NYT, Mar. 5, 7, and Apr. 30, 1947). Alemán’s words adhered to an unwritten rule of official Mexican nationalism (which still prevails): it is politically correct to praise a U.S. envoy but not his country or his institutions—that is, the individual, but not the system of which he forms a part.

Truman showed that he, too, was a master of words: he responded that he had “never had such a welcome” in his life and that if the inter-American system were to resemble Mexico-U.S. relations, the hemisphere would be “the happiest place in the world.” He added that Alemán was “a gentleman of whom I have become very fond, who is doing a great piece of work for his country, and who is a friend [of the United States]” (NYT, Mar. 4, 6, and Apr. 30, 1947). As far as can be determined, it was from this moment that certain sectors within the U.S. elite began to refer to Alemán as “Mister Amigo.”

Toward late April and early May of 1947, Alemán made a nine-day visit to the United States. He met with an extraordinarily warm welcome, unparalleled in the history of relations between the two nations. Even by the Times’s conservative estimates, between 600,000 and 800,000 Washingtonians turned out to welcome the Mexican president, and this in a city well accustomed to visits by world figures. Truman declared a national holiday for schoolchildren and the federal bureaucracy, in order to further swell the enthusiastic multitudes, in an Anglo-Saxon version of the acarreo3 (NYT, Apr. 30, 1947). Congress opened its doors to Alemán, the first Mexican (or Latin American) president to address the joint houses of Congress, clear evidence of the “warm friendship with which the American people see Alemán and his nation” (NYT 1947).

Alemán’s reception in New York was even more spectacular. Published estimates of the crowd range from one million (NYT, May 3, 1947) to two million (New York Mirror) and even 2.5 million (Excélsior, May 3, 1947), again including children, who were given a school holiday. Alemán was showered with honors and distinctions, incidentally reinforcing a close friendship between the Mexican president and New York mayor William O’Dwyer, which was to develop an interesting trajectory.

Throughout his visit, Alemán stressed that, in his opinion, the two neighbors were allies and that Mexico was more than willing to support the United States, satisfying the conservative ideology that con-

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3Translator’s note: This is the practice, traditional in Mexican politics, of cajoling multitudes into attending political rallies or events through bribes or coercion.
trolled the United States' dominant worldview. He declared that Mexico and the United States had "similarity of institutions and a common love of freedom" and that they were marching together down the path of democracy. He reiterated his "absolute faith in democracy" (NYT, April 30 and May 3, 1947). And in order to make it absolutely clear that his version of democracy was the same as the U.S. version, Alemán added that "when the State curtails individual freedom in order to impose its will or that of a political party, civilization is on the wane" (NYT, May 2, 8, 1947).

One of the U.S. elite's priorities during this era was to redirect "Latin American political and military policy toward regional collaboration in hemispheric defense" (NSC 1949: 3). Alemán touched on this topic on a number of occasions. In his speech before Congress, he declared that "democracy, if not backed by force, whets the appetites of dictators." Before another audience, he emphasized the "interdependence of the American nations" and warned that "the weakness of one of them could jeopardize the security of all, and of the world." He was even clearer when speaking at the United States Military Academy at West Point: "You belong," he cautioned the cadets, "to the generation in whose hands destiny has placed the imperative necessity of bolstering collective security." He added that Mexico would contribute to the common effort, sending workers to the United States and providing a warm welcome for foreign investors (NYT, May 1–3, 6, 1947).

American reactions were enthusiastic, and press accounts overflowed with praise for Alemán and the relationship between the two countries. Times coverage of the two presidential summits included 52 positive, 12 informative, and only one negative comment (figures 54–55), making them the best covered of all presidential encounters.

**Meanings of the 1947 Summits**

The presidential summits shed a great deal of light on the state of the relationship and on the influences that have shaped it over time. In 1947, both heads of state were clearly willing to provide mutual support. During Alemán's visit to the United States, Washington announced a $100 million loan to Mexico for the construction of roads linking the two countries (Truman 1955: 219–21, 1956: 104). This set an enduring precedent: with few exceptions, U.S.–Mexican presidential summits have all resulted in the announcement of loans for Mexico. This was motive for some celebration in 1947; it would gradually turn into a cause for concern, and eventually into a nightmare as Mexico's foreign debt mounted uncontrollably. (This spiraling debt reflects a schizophrenic tendency in Mexico's foreign policy: despite
all attempts to adopt an autonomous development model, the economic relationship with the United States has imposed a gradual integration of the two national economies.

From a historical perspective, the summits were yet another indication of the power asymmetry between the two nations. An entire chapter in Miguel Alemán’s memoirs explores the significance of his visit to the United States (Alemán 1987: 263–72). Truman, on the other hand, considered his meetings with Alemán to be of little import. Despite the speeches and the crowds, Alemán’s visit (or Alemán himself) is not mentioned in Truman’s memoirs, while Truman’s visit to Mexico is recalled in a single cold phrase (NYT, May 14, 1947). Truman’s attitude was not unusual: except for Jimmy Carter, whose focus on Mexico intensified as a result of his bitterness toward José López Portillo, not a single U.S. president has penned more than a few lines concerning Mexico.

The summit also illuminated some darker aspects of the relationship. Mayor O’Dwyer of New York, who had struck up a close relationship with Alemán, was named ambassador to Mexico in 1950. Unfortunately (for O’Dwyer), his appointment coincided with the establishment in the U.S. Senate of the Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, which concluded that “the problem of organized crime can be summed up in the parallel lives [of gangster Frank Costello and Ambassador to Mexico William O’Dwyer].” According to the Committee’s findings, Costello committed crimes, and O’Dwyer then covered them up, thereby contributing “directly or indirectly to the spread of organized crime” (Dwight Smith 1975: 132). O’Dwyer resigned from his post in 1952, at the end of Alemán’s six-year term. He stayed on in Mexico, however, where he established a prosperous law firm.

Certain aspects of this facet of the relationship invite closer examination. For example, could there be a pattern in the not uncommon custom among diplomats of staying on to do business in Mexico? And could there be collaboration among members of the government elites in the creation of binational criminal organizations? During his stay in Mexico, for example, did O’Dwyer establish a relationship with Colonel Antonio Serrano, founder of the feared Federal Security Directorate (Dirección Federal de Seguridad, or DFS) created by Miguel Alemán? According to the CIA, Serrano “abused his considerable power by tolerating, and even participating in, illegal activities including drug trafficking” (CIA 1953). Could O’Dwyer’s links with the Mafia be the origins of some binational network to promote the trade of illegal narcotics between Mexico and the United States?

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1Every study of organized crime since 1950 mentions O’Dwyer (see Albini 1971; Ianni 1972; Talese 1971).
ENTHUSIASM OF MEXICAN POLITICIANS AND MEDIA

The reaction of the Mexican press demonstrates the free rein that journalists have when it comes to laudatory coverage of the Mexican president—and the close ties between the media and the Mexican government. The Mexican media competed to see which could produce the most flattering portrayal of Alemán. The following comes from a front-page article in Excélsior:

ALEMÁN, TRUMAN . . . such smiles of optimism! Smiles that augur a noble, firm, and sincere friendship between two people who understand and admire one another, who seem to see the road of their progressive futures growing broader and more luminous, a road which, premised on democracy, will follow a clear and magnificent course. Geographical destiny has determined that the lives of these nations will be forever closely joined (May 1, 1947).

The following day, El Nacional reported on Alemán’s speech before the U.S. Congress under the headline, “SENSATIONAL SPEECH . . . LOUDLY ACCLAIMED.” The opening sentences of the article blend readily with the political rhetoric of postrevolutionary Mexico: “The Mexican people’s scheme of ideas [was] laid bare before Congress with transparency and frankness by the president, licenciado Miguel Alemán. In his gallant statement, we discern certain ‘essential concepts’” (El Nacional, May 2, 1947).

The special envoys who accompanied Alemán also waxed eloquent. In a front-page story, legendary journalist Luis Spota stated that “one of the greatest days in the life of Miguel Alemán [came when] he spoke before the United States Congress, harvesting the greatest ovation ever heard in this hall of historic decisions.” No-less-famous journalist Carlos Denegri added, “A few hours after a solemn session in Congress, the President of Mexico was brilliantly undergoing . . . the test of a lifetime: facing the world’s press, which bombarded him with questions and flashbulbs, with no aid save his own inspiration” (Excélsior, May 2, 1947).

Alemán returned to a welcome that rivaled a national holiday. According to journalist Luis Ochoa, “people who know about our national fiestas cannot help but draw comparisons. And they feel that the welcome accorded to Francisco I. Madero in Mexico City, after the triumph of the Revolution in 1910, could not compare with the homecoming for President Alemán on his return from an extremely fruitful trip to the United States” (Excélsior, May 8, 1947). Because Truman’s aircraft (the Sacred Cow), in which Alemán had traveled, landed to this reception late at night, Mexico City authorities declared the fol-
lowing day a holiday so that the many thousands who had poured out to greet Alemán could rest.

Press coverage included Alemán’s speeches in full, as well as countless articles exploring the most trivial aspects of the experience with saccharine obsequiousness. Although Alemán undoubtedly received an unparalleled reception in the United States, the excessive response among the Mexican media suggests a possible point of origin for the delusions of omnipotence that frequently grip Mexican presidents.

There was an almost total lack of even remotely serious analyses regarding the significance of the summit for both nations or for Mexican society. No one pointed out the patently superficial nature of Mexican nationalism: based merely on a warm U.S. welcome for its president, Mexico’s traditional suspicions of its northern neighbor virtually melted away. This raises certain question—and leads to a closer examination of the myth of Mexican nationalism.

THE CONTRASTING STYLE OF RUIZ CORTINES

The discretion that characterized President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines’s six years in power (1952–1958) was very much in evidence during his two summit meetings with President Dwight Eisenhower. These two leaders’ first meeting was to inaugurate a dam on the U.S.–Mexico border. Eisenhower spoke about how agreeable it was to have a neighbor like Mexico and attacked “totalitarianism, its gaudy promise and grim practice.” Ruiz Cortines replied by emphasizing the Mexican people’s “inherent aversion to all injustice” as well as “their intense devotion to the cause of peace and, above all . . . their great love of liberty.” He defended the principle of self-determination, as well as the right of all peoples to choose a government and economic system to their own liking (NYT, Oct. 20, 1953).

Ruiz Cortines’s comments underscored the independent image of his nation’s foreign policy—especially significant in view of the fact that only a few months earlier Eisenhower had approved the overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala. If this was the subtext of Ruiz Cortines’s speech, Eisenhower apparently remained unaware of it. His memoirs merely state that “a gratifying friendship” grew from his meeting “with the Mexican President, which allowed the establishment of effective lines of communication” to settle problems approaching on the horizon (Eisenhower 1963: 240).

At the second summit, held in West Virginia in 1956, Canadian prime minister Louis St. Laurent was also in attendance, making this

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5Alemán’s summits merited 64 mentions in the Times, Ruiz Cortines’s, 26; see figures 54–57.
the first summit of heads of state from the three nations of North America. A confidential document reveals that Ruiz Cortines brought up the issues of migratory workers (which had already provoked confrontations with Washington), cotton exports, and a fisheries dispute. Eisenhower, on the other hand, was more interested in halting Communist subversion and in obtaining landing rights in Mexican airports for U.S. airlines (WH 1956). The *Times* quoted the Mexican chief executive as stating that “the question of continental security had not been discussed” (NYT, Mar. 30, 1956). Minutes of these discussions confirm Ruiz Cortines’s declaration.

Thus Alemán and Ruiz Cortines sent similar messages to the people of the United States. They differed only in tone. Mexico wished to preserve the relationship within the framework of an understanding struck decades earlier: Mexico’s presidents would support a pragmatic and functional relationship with their northern neighbor in order to guarantee the maneuvering space they needed to promote a mixed economy and keep themselves in power. The United States felt that, even if Mexico failed to endorse military agreements, open its oil industry to foreign investment, or openly oppose Arbenz, the problem was not the president’s lack of will; rather, it was a result of his need to maintain stability by pacifying nationalists and Communists (NYT 1956a). A 1958 *Times* editorial suggested that problems in the relationship were minor, and that “except among a few thousand professional Mexican Communists the old hatreds are dead” (NYT 1958a). As we shall see, this view of Mexican reality was being encouraged by events in other areas of the relationship.