Myths and [mis] perceptions

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Myths and [mis] perceptions: changing U.S. elite visions of Mexico.

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Four Facets of the Relationship

The relationship between Mexico and the United States encompasses several facets, all interconnected through the tacit understanding that the two governments would provide mutual support in times of need. In some areas of the relationship, the Mexican government has acceded to Washington's dictates. In others it has established significant levels of autonomy and independence, a remarkable achievement in light of the marked power asymmetry between the two nations. This chapter explores several aspects of the bilateral relationship and begins to establish their connections with Mexico's political system. The chapter draws heavily on the findings of prior research. What is new is the approach, which attempts to bring together a broad array of materials, both published and unpublished within a theoretical framework that permits a more precise and integrated understanding.

Mexico's foreign policy is not unusual. It tends to reflect the interests of the nation or its governing elite. In general terms, its goal is to extend Mexico's margins of autonomy as much as possible within the shadow of a neighbor accustomed to having its own way. Sometimes Mexico has succeeded, sometimes not. But regardless of foreign policy outcomes, Mexican discourse exalting the myth of independence has remained constant, preserving an image of a sovereign Mexico. The Mexican government has used such discourse to placate the nationalist Left as well as the progressive international sector, and in this it generally has succeeded.

Results have varied by issue area. This chapter explores four of these areas, reflecting four facets of the relationship. They are the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954; Mexico's refusal to enter into a military alliance with the United States; the petroleum industry's rejection of foreign investment; and Mexican migration to the United States. These widely diverging issues reflect a kaleidoscopic relation-
ship, founded upon a basic understanding between the two government elites.

AN INDEPENDENT DIPLOMACY?

Does the United States impose limits on Mexico's foreign policy? The answer, for revolutionary Mexico, is emphatically negative. An established myth holds that Mexico's foreign policy is guided by the principles of self-determination, nonintervention, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. The U.S. elite was never bothered by the independence of Mexican diplomacy. The reason for this is outlined in part in a military document from 1946:

Mexican foreign policy has always evinced a clear understanding of the weakness, in fact the indefensibility, of its position should the United States decide to use military force, or exert serious economic or political pressure over an extended period. Mexico seeks to consolidate its position as an independent power in international affairs, within the limits imposed by this understanding. In consequence, we can expect Mexico to frequently be at odds with the United States, in matters of secondary importance (JIC 1946: 31, emphasis added).

This view of Mexican foreign policy is complemented by the certainty, cited earlier, that "in case of war . . . [or in any other critical situation] Mexico would be an ally of the United States" (DA 1949: 6). The Guatemalan revolution which took place in the 1950s will allow us to compare these notions with reality.

When Jacobo Arbenz became president of Guatemala in 1950, he stepped up the pace of his country's reform process. Although the changes were fairly modest, by the summer of 1953 Washington had decided to oust Arbenz, arguing that his regime was dominated by Communists who posed a threat to U.S. security. This decision entailed the implementation of a complex strategy, combining instruments of hegemony and coercion (see, especially, Gleijeses 1991).

The U.S. strategy also called for the diplomatic isolation of Guatemala, which required the support of the hemisphere's other nations. During the tenth Inter-American Meeting of the Organization of American States in Caracas in March 1954, the United States proposed a resolution issuing a "simple, clear, and direct" warning for international Communism: stay out of the hemisphere. Clearly, this message was directed specifically at Arbenz's Guatemala. Throughout this meeting Mexico voiced support for Guatemala, defending the principles of nonintervention and self-determination, and suggesting
a series of amendments to Washington's resolution which, according to the Times, sought to "cripple" the American position (NYT, Mar. 12, 1954). The U.S. government was so annoyed by these proposed amendments that it publicly labeled the Mexican position "vague, legalistic, unacceptable" (SRE 1958: 69-76). In any event, Mexico's diplomatic objections were no more than an irritant: the U.S.-proposed resolution passed, with seventeen votes in favor, one against (Guatemala), and two abstentions (Mexico and Argentina) (Pellicer and Mancilla 1978: 100).

Ample documentary evidence indicates that Mexican diplomats gallantly defended the principles of their country's foreign policy. Mexico's minister of foreign affairs during this era, Luis Padilla Nervo, held a conversation with his counterpart in the United States, John Foster Dulles, in which he recalled "the days when Mexico was alone; the times when we were carrying out economic and social reforms, the days of the Revolution. If a panel of American nations had sat in judgment upon Mexico during that era, surely they would not have found us to be free from foreign influences." For Dulles, Padilla Nervo's point of view was not based on principles; it reflected "no less than a true Communist infiltration, or its equivalent, into the Mexican government" (in Whitehead 1991: 331).

This statement reflects a prevalent idea among conservatives in the United States—that Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a nest of leftists. The Ministry's activism has always been seen as part of a balancing act, which only rarely affects U.S. interests. For the Americans, what truly counts are the statements and actions of the president, because it is he who determines the course of Mexico's foreign policy.

The apex in negative references to Mexican foreign policy appearing in the Times came between 1953 and 1954, against the backdrop of a generally optimistic view of Mexico. Distrust of Mexico was common during this period; Times correspondent Sidney Gruson openly labeled the Ruiz Cortines government "anti-Yankee" (NYT, May 17, 1954). However, as the covert operation against Arbenz proceeded undeterred, U.S. annoyance with Mexico, as expressed in the Times, abated. The numbers speak for themselves: in 1953, the variable that registers bilateral relations contains 14 negative mentions but only 4 for 1954 (figure 49).

The reason behind this turnabout was that the Mexican president and administration had modified their position. According to the Times, Mexico executed "a complete reversal in its position on Guatemala" on June 10, 1954, when Minister of Foreign Affairs José Gorostiza announced that Mexico favored a "new meeting of the American republics, to discuss the question of Communism in Guatemala" (NYT, June 11, 14, 1954). Pellicer and Mancilla confirm that a few
days later, with the CIA-organized invasion of Guatemala well under way, the Mexican government “failed to live up to its vaunted support for the principle of nonintervention”; on the contrary, it maintained total silence, turning a deaf ear on Arbenz’s increasingly desperate pleas for assistance (1978: 102).

*Times* correspondent Sidney Gruson’s interpretation of this about-face confirms the pragmatic nature of Mexican foreign policy. The government abandoned Guatemala at this key juncture for three fundamental reasons. First, President Ruiz Cortines hoped to “overcome the impression held by many foreign observers and Mexicans” that his was a “pro-Communist, anti–United States government.” Second, the Mexican president was swayed by information received from the United States that established the existence of close ties between the Guatemalan Communists and Moscow leaders. And third, the peso had suffered a recent devaluation (in April 1954) and, as Gruson himself was quick to point out, “Mexico’s economic progress or economic stagnation might well depend on the quality of its official relations with the United States” (NYT, July 26 and Sept. 1, 1954).

After Arbenz’s overthrow, Mexico’s collaboration with the United States proceeded apace. On June 27, 1954, Arbenz resigned the Guatemalan presidency and sought asylum in the Mexican Embassy in Guatemala City. After seventy-three days, he and his family obtained a safe-conduct and traveled to Mexico City, where Arbenz vowed to continue the struggle against the new Guatemalan government. He then left for Europe, in December 1954. Although he had been officially promised he could return to Mexico (most likely by the Ministry of Government), once he reached Paris his application for a return visa was rejected by the Mexican Embassy there, which stated that this was not a “suitable moment.” Arbenz, who hoped to live out his remaining years close to Guatemala, persisted in his application, which was consistently denied until 1970, when he was finally allowed to return to Mexico. He died a few months later, in January 1971 (Gleijeses 1991: 390–92).1

The Guatemalan case exemplifies the changes that were taking place in Mexico’s foreign policy. In Caracas, Mexico espoused a diplomacy of principles. However, as soon as Mexico’s relations with the United States began to fray, principles were abandoned. This adjustment likely resulted from Mexico’s official pragmatism, interacting with pressure that the United States brought to bear. Because this episode has not been subjected to detailed analysis, we cannot establish the magnitude or intensity of U.S. pressure. We can state, however, that Guatemala was a good example of the Mexican govern-

1These events, incidentally, reveal that the myth of Mexico as a country open to asylum seekers does not always prove true.
ment's ability to preserve the image of pursuing an independent foreign policy even when such an image does not coincide with reality.

THE PETROLEUM INDUSTRY

U.S. attitudes toward the Mexican petroleum industry reveal a great deal about the bilateral relationship. The history and evolution of this sector also reflect Mexico's capacity to resist pressure from the United States, whose interest in oil was even greater than its mistrust of state-managed enterprises.2

A 1948 congressional report noted that the United States required "adequate supplies, especially of petroleum, for any threat to our security" (in Krock 1948). The State Department, therefore, encouraged the U.S. oil industry to "expand operations into all areas where there were prospects of tapping additional oil sources for the purpose of aiding national defense." Evidently the development of Mexico's petroleum industry was an integral part of the "defense of the Western Hemisphere" (NYT, June 13, 1948; Sept. 14, 1954). In Mexico, however, where the petroleum industry was entirely in the hands of a state-managed company created through the nationalization of foreign-owned assets, foreign investments were prohibited by law.

Washington abhorred all forms of nationalism—except, of course, American nationalism. The Department of State defined Latin America's nationalism as "an emotional rationalization of [Latin Americans'] political, economic, and social failures" (DOS 1952: 9). The U.S. elite viewed nationalizations as identical to expropriations and, as pointed out in the Times, the "word 'expropriation' is like a red cape to a bull" for the U.S. oil community (NYT, Apr. 11, 1947). Americans' reactions to the "expropriation" of the Mexican oil industry were also reflected in their attitude toward Lázaro Cárdenas, the Times's least favorite president (figures 19-20).

A 1951 Times editorial bemoaning Iran's nationalization of its petroleum industry asked whether "the Iranians took the trouble to study what oil nationalization has meant to Mexico," a nation that could have become an important producer of crude oil, but instead had "not turned up a single new rich field in thirteen years" (NYT 1951a). A further editorial noted criticisms from "Communists and others who dislike us," who maintained that U.S. companies all too frequently exploited "the countries in which they do business," usually leaving "nothing behind them but a hole in the ground." The Times countered these criticisms with examples like Venezuela's Creole Petroleum which, the paper argued, "'exploits' Venezuelan oil,

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2 For a broad overview, see L. Meyer 1973, 1978; Grayson 1980.
not its people or its government; it puts into Venezuela far more than it takes out" (NYT 1959a).

Ideas like these led the United States to pressure Mexico and PEMEX (Petróleos Mexicanos, the state-run oil company) into increasing production and opening the petroleum sector to foreign investment. Washington also refused to authorize loans or any other form of support for the Mexican oil company. However, these attitudes changed on par with changing circumstances. A U.S. Defense Department memorandum from 1950 considered that in "the development of Mexican oil production no strong military interest is evident at present or likely in the near future" (DOD 1950). But when Iran nationalized its oil industry in 1951, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Oscar Chapman visited Mexico, where he declared that the United States now wanted "new oil sources discovered and exploited in our hemisphere" (NYT, July 22, 26, 27, 1951).

At this juncture, Mexico was hoping to obtain loans with which to purchase needed capital goods from the United States. Negotiations for these loans demonstrated once again the inconsistent nationalism of certain Mexican government officials and the U.S. elite's willingness to help them maintain their nationalistic image. A game now began in which a number of Mexicans made secret overtures to the United States, confirming their willingness to offer concessions (they immediately reversed themselves when their maneuverings became public). A U.S. State Department memorandum from 1952 explained the situation thus: "the conditions laid down by our government for an oil loan were received with understanding when expressed orally"; but "when the same conditions were explained in an aide-mémoire, the Mexicans felt obliged to react strongly for the record and to terminate the negotiations" (DOS 1952: 26).

The U.S. elite accepted these inconsistencies, which were seen as a mechanism designed to calm Mexican nationalists and ensure stability. Nationalism, however, even that espoused by former president Lázaro Cárdenas, concerned them, although the reasons for such concern are not apparent in any available documents.

This "image game" produced tangible results for both governments. The Mexican elite was able to curtail U.S. ambition somewhat, while Washington earned a number of concessions. The first U.S. investment in the Mexican oil sector dates from 1948, ten years after the oil "expropriation" (NYT, Mar. 23, 1948); it was followed by a number of small contracts in 1949, whose questionable legality, however, was a source of continuing unease in the United States. According to influential columnist Arthur Krock, many of these contracts had to skirt Mexican law in order to avoid political problems (Krock 1949). Such comments serve to explain the increased coverage of Mexican corruption during the 1940s and mid-1950s (figure 93). Of greater rele-
vance for the United States, however, was the fact that the Mexican president was willing to guarantee privately that, in any critical circumstance, the United States would have access to Mexican crude.\(^3\)

This state of affairs, while not completely satisfactory to the United States, was the only arrangement possible within the rules of the established understanding. The United States would have preferred an explicit alliance, or total financial opening of the oil industry, rather than verbal commitments or concessions based on varying interpretations of the law. But they accepted Mexico’s conditions, a clear coup for that government.

**THE MILITARY RELATIONSHIP**

Within the framework of the bilateral relationship, Mexico’s greatest level of independence was in the military arena. After World War II, the United States began to incorporate the Latin American nations into the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, complemented over time with bilateral military accords as part of a broader global strategy (B. Smith 1982: 262–300). The Mexican government disagreed with this strategy and suggested that security might better be enhanced by channeling economic aid to the region, given that “economically weak nations [are unable to act] decisively and effectively against aggressors” (NYT, Aug. 16, 1947). This was not the only difference; Mexico also refused to sign the Inter-American Treaty or any bilateral military accord with Washington.

Mexico’s new attitude contrasted sharply with the close military cooperation that had prevailed during the war. The United States had hoped to extend this cooperation into the postwar era, and there are signs that the Mexican army was amenable. A meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of both nations took place in Mexico in March 1945, for which Mexico’s National Defense Ministry prepared a secret report documenting the Mexican military’s willingness to play a more active international role—and to enter into a close relationship with the United States. The military stated that they were “prepared to assume any international obligations which may be agreed upon at the upcoming San Francisco Conference” (SDN 1945: 5).\(^4\)

But Mexico’s civilian leaders thought differently, and they prevailed, curtailing the relationship between the Mexican military and the United States. Nonetheless, for a number of years the Pentagon,

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\(^3\)U.S. government documents reveal that in January 1947 President Miguel Alemán informed the U.S. ambassador that “in any emergency that might threaten the United States or this hemisphere, Mexico’s oil resources will be at its immediate disposal” (in Whitehead 1991: 327).

\(^4\)It was at this conference that the United Nations was created.
hoping to establish a bilateral accord, continued to strive for a closer relationship with Mexico's armed forces.\footnote{For an overview of the military affair, see Wager 1992. Mexican authors who have explored this issue include Piñeyro (1987) and Benítez (1994).} These efforts were doubled during Miguel Alemán’s presidency (NSC 1949).

At this point the Mexico–United States military relationship was the most important issue on the U.S. agenda, as reflected in the *Times* coverage. Its primacy was largely the result of the two nations’ proximity and of the Korean War, which broke out in 1951. The United States sought to pressure Mexico into making a “concrete gesture of solidarity by sending a token force to fight in Korea” (NYT, Feb. 5, 1952). Mexico refused, despite the United States’ continued insistence. In 1952, a U.S. military mission arrived in Mexico, hoping that newly installed President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines would display a different attitude. Their talks proved fruitless, and by mid–1953 the White House had “about given up hope of obtaining Mexico’s agreement” (NYT, July 8, 1953). These events sorely vexed the U.S. elite, and 8 of the 9 negative references concerning the military relationship between Mexico and the United States that appeared over a span of four decades following World War II were published between 1953 and 1954. The latter year also witnessed the greatest number of references to Mexico’s nationalistic tendencies, which were equated with anti-American sentiment (figure 94).

The Mexican government justified its stance in terms of a basic principle—the peaceful resolution of conflicts—which precluded their military intervention in foreign affairs. The Americans did not blame Ruiz Cortines; they blamed “the Communist Party and its left-wing allies, who played upon the anti-American feelings of many Mexicans” (NYT, Sept. 14, 1954). However, there is a more likely explanation: the Mexican civilian government’s parade of principles also served, not coincidentally, to distance their military from the Pentagon and from foreign ideas and doctrines, in line with the general objective of keeping Mexico isolated. This may well have been a wise move, because, as Laurence Whitehead noted, “subsequent events have shown that the price paid in the long term for [military support from] the Pentagon proved very steep for the political authority and the stability of the Latin American governments” (1991: 331).

We should consider what motive prompted the United States to tolerate Mexico’s continuing rejection of any form of military accord. There are two likely candidates. First, the Mexican expeditionary force that Washington hoped would travel to Korea had, in fact, no genuine military role to play and was merely a piece of political symbolism; exerting further pressure on Mexico in this matter might have threatened the country’s internal political equilibrium, which was the
top priority. Second, any disaccord between Mexico's and the United States' respective armed forces did not extend to other security-related areas, where close cooperation was very much in evidence. The FBI maintained an office in Mexico, and U.S. intelligence services exchanged information with Mexico's Ministry of Government and its Federal Security Directorate.

In any case, Mexico was able to preserve a remarkable degree of autonomy in military affairs into the 1980s, at which point increasing contact between the U.S. and Mexican governments affected this and all aspects of the relationship.

**Mexican Migration**

The phenomenon of Mexico–U.S. migration sheds light on the American consciousness, on the Mexican government's tight controls over the dissemination of information, and on the nature of coercion as an instrument of domination.¹ In the eyes of the U.S. government, migration to the United States from Mexico is an internal, domestic issue, to be dealt with unilaterally by the United States, without input from or consultation with Mexico. During the 1950s, migration was the only issue area in which the United States successfully employed coercion and Mexico was forced to accept the conditions set down by the United States.

Mexican migration gained importance during World War II, when the demand for military goods, along with a shortage of workers in the United States, led the two countries to sign the first "Bracero" accord in 1942. After the war, migration persisted: the U.S. economy had come to depend on the Mexican workforce, and the Mexican economy was having increasing difficulty absorbing all of the would-be entrants into its labor market. During the Bracero period (1942–1964), U.S. opinion was divided into two camps. The first camp, which included the great majority of Americans, had little interest in the Mexican workers who were employed, largely invisibly, in U.S. agriculture. Among the individuals who did care (the second camp) were those who were in favor, because they profited economically from Mexican labor; those opposed, because they felt they were being hurt by migration; and those who viewed migration as an issue of principles (such as public safety, national security, and/or humanitarian considerations) and favored or opposed it on those grounds.

Those who defended migration for economic reasons included the growers, who argued that they required large numbers of cheap, temporary workers because U.S. workers were insufficient and ex-

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¹This section benefited from the suggestions of Dr. Manuel García y Griego, of the University of California, Irvine.
pensive (NYT, Jan. 15, 1950). Migration, they suggested, benefited both societies: Mexicans obtained a better wage, and Americans paid less for agricultural products. This sector proved sufficiently powerful—in both economic and political terms—to keep the border open to migratory labor. The U.S. agricultural sector flexed its muscle on other migration-related issues as well. In 1951, the state of Arizona proposed a sanitation code to improve working conditions for Mexican field laborers. The code was rejected after growers' associations claimed that it would force them into bankruptcy (NYT, July 16, 1951). In Washington, farmers' organizations pressured Congress to reject "amendments"—such as fines on employers of migrant workers, or increased allocations for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—designed to penalize or curtail the migratory flow (NYT, June 28, 1951). All the amendments were defeated by a significant margin (NYT, Feb. 14, 1952). Further, the Texas Proviso, adopted in March 1952, exempted all employers from any form of punishment for hiring undocumented workers.

Foremost among those who opposed migration for economic reasons were U.S. labor unions, which argued that the problem was not a shortage of American labor, but rather the poor working conditions and low salaries that were on offer. They added that the Mexican migrant workers were exploited and that they took jobs from local day laborers, increased unemployment, and posed serious problems for the organization of agricultural workers' unions (NYT, Oct. 17, 21, 26, 1948; Aug. 13, 1950). Therefore, they called upon Congress to establish "adequate sanctions" for those who hired Mexicans and to approve additional resources for the INS (NYT, Feb. 7, 1947).

Other sectors that opposed migration predicated their opposition on a variety of grounds, which changed over time. Some believed that migration led to an increase in crime (NYT, Mar. 26, 1951). Others linked migration to the opium and marijuana trade (NYT, Apr. 12, 1951). And still others cited sanitary or racial arguments: Representative Emanuel Celler, of New York, expressed concern for the migrants' working conditions, but he also suggested that their presence carried negative moral and sanitary implications. He criticized farmers for closing the border to diseased cattle while allowing "Mexican humans to come in without examination of their health and morals. What of the contagion of trachoma, leprosy and smallpox?" Convinced that Europeans were innately healthier, Celler suggested that Italian farmworkers be hired "as permanent residents, instead of temporary Mexican migrant workers" (NYT, Apr. 12, 1951; Jan. 29, 1952).

Finally, some opponents felt that migration threatened the United States' national security. In 1953, the "possibility that Communists [could be] infiltrating their agents" into the United States disguised as
Mexican peasants was taken quite seriously. Walter Reuther noted that "wetbacks" often participated in "fifth-column activities of subversion and sabotage," and in 1954 a member of the Immigration and Naturalization Service suggested that "approximately 100 present and past members of the Communist Party" were entering the United States from Mexico every day (NYT, Jan. 27, 1953; Feb. 9–10, 1954). This statement was patently tainted by the paranoia that typified the era. At the time, the Mexican Communist Party had some five thousand members; had the INS member's assertion been true, all would have found themselves in the United States in less than two months.

THE TIMES, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

The information that the Times published concerning migration, as well as the preferential treatment the topic received, are quite extraordinary (figure 58). The paper's editorial line was to oppose the presence of migrant workers but to support the migrants' right to receive decent treatment. In an editorial from March 27, 1951, the paper supported tighter controls on migration, which, it claimed, was having a negative effect upon the labor market. However, it also called for an end to "the merciless exploitation" of the braceros. In another editorial from 1951, the Times backed the allocation of more resources for agencies charged with enforcing immigration regulations and the implementation of penalties against employers who hired migrant workers (respectively, NYT 1951b, 1951c, 1951d).

One extraordinary aspect of the Times coverage of this phenomenon was its genuine effort to portray the many aspects of migration. By so doing, the paper contributed to a heightened awareness of this issue's inherent complexity. Gladwin Hill—the best journalist to cover Mexican affairs during this era and a pioneer of Mexico–United States migratory studies—provided extensive detail regarding the appalling conditions endured by the Mexican workers, the extortion to which they were subjected by Mexican functionaries, and the exploitation they suffered once in the United States. He also demonstrated that American labor unions had a sound basis for their criticisms of migration.7

One way to evaluate an individual's, group's, or society's progress in terms of consciousness is to observe what they do not discuss or take into consideration. During the Cold War, neither the causes of migration nor the Mexican government's viewpoint were taken into consideration in the United States. Nonetheless, some ideas that would later come to the fore—during the 1970s and 1980s—

7Of the many articles that Hill published on this issue, see especially the series that ran from March 24 to 29, 1951, which resulted in a number of congressional hearings.
occasionally surfaced, generated by individuals who were transcending the boundaries of the group's maximum consciousness. In a lengthy article from 1950, for example, Albert Steinberg stated that "the sudden invasion [of braceros] stems from the serious depression and general inflation" prevailing in Mexico. His conclusion was remarkable, especially for the time: "whether the answer to the 'wetbacks' can be found without a general solution to Mexico's economic ailments is hard to tell" (Steinberg 1950).

Another early glimmer of an idea that would spread in later years appeared in an editorial which suggested that what motivated Mexicans to leave their country was "the low living standards and wages that can be found in Mexico." Yet another nascent concern was the idea that migration would cause the United States to lose control over its border. In 1953, a front-page article in the Times warned that "there is nothing to stop the entire Mexican nation from entering the United States" (NYT, May 10, 1953).

It is important at this point to note that content analysis is extremely useful in establishing how often a specific idea or fact is mentioned, but subtleties are sometimes lost. For example, while negative references to migration outnumbered positive ones (figure 58), content analysis fails to indicate the extent to which the Times also stood up for migrants' rights. Another limitation of content analysis is that it cannot measure a newspaper's or an article's true impact. We know that the U.S. elite reads the Times, but establishing the extent to which its articles influence their decisions is difficult. For this, other techniques are needed—such as tallying the frequency with which the Times is quoted in the Congressional Record and then observing whether Congress's decisions coincide with the Times's recommendations.

FRICTION AND COERCION

If we adopt a different perspective, we find that American indifference toward Mexico's views on migration was due partly to the fact that there were no Mexicans in a position (or determined enough) to make themselves heard in U.S. debates. The migrants themselves were disorganized and without resources. Mexican academics were not studying migration—nor the broader field of U.S. affairs (an important exception was Daniel Cosío Villegas). Although the Mexican Left criticized the aspects of Mexican society that underlay the exploitation and discrimination that migratory workers suffered in the United States, its influence in Mexico was limited and its credibility in

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*For an article by Hill that includes the Mexican perspective, see NYT, Jan. 18, 1953.*
the United States was nil. The Mexican press explored the issue only superficially, rarely straying from official guidelines. The Mexican government, meanwhile, had found in migration a perfect solution to the shortage of jobs in Mexico, as well as a source of income to support the country’s industrialization project and a captive population on which avaricious functionaries and politicians could feast (by using a wide range of methods to systematically extort monies from peasants traveling to the United States).

Although some in government (including President Ruiz Cortines) sought to protect migratory workers from exploitation, extortion, and discrimination, they made little headway. It seemed that the only way to improve working conditions for braceros in the United States, the only way to bring pressure to bear, was to cut off the flow of labor. Mexico’s attempts to take this decisive step produced negligible results, demonstrating both the weakness of Mexico’s position and the United States’ brazenness and unilateralism.

In 1947, the Mexican government tried to hold up the legal migration of braceros, hoping to secure better economic and working conditions for them through an accord then being negotiated. Washington’s response was swift. The El Paso office of the Border Patrol “[opened] the border to thousands of braceros, and turned them over to [American agricultural employers]” without prior authorization from Washington (NYT, Oct. 17, 1948). Angered Mexican authorities renounced the accord, but after they received a diplomatic apology from the Department of State, the accord went forward and was approved less than a year later.

A much more serious situation arose a few years later, when the United States was obviously using coercive tactics. Negotiations relating to labor migration had stalled, but U.S. employers desperately needed their Mexican workforce. At this juncture, in January 1954, the Departments of State, Labor, and Justice began hiring Mexicans unilaterally. Because the executive branch had no legal authority to act in this way, hiring was interrupted for a few weeks until the House of Representatives passed legislation empowering employers to hire Mexican workers directly, “with or without the consent of the Mexican government” (NYT, Mar. 3, 1954).9

An infuriated President Ruiz Cortines deployed Mexican immigration agents and army units along the border to prevent peasants from traveling to the United States. The only result was a series of embarrassing confrontations between angry peasants who wished to work in the United States and the confused soldiers who had been ordered to stop them (NYT, Jan. 24, 27, 28 and Feb. 2, 1954).

9Antecedents can be found in NYT, Nov. 8 and Dec. 22, 1953.
These incidents clearly illustrate the Mexican authorities' tight grip on the dissemination of information. An analysis of the coverage of these events for January and February 1954 in three Mexico City dailies (*Excélsior*, *El Nacional*, and *El Universal*) revealed that all three painted reassuring pictures of events on the border, widely at odds with coverage in the U.S. press. The Mexican media’s techniques (still in use today) included running as front-page headlines statements by key functionaries or celebrities favorable to the regime. For example, *El Universal* ran an eight-column front-page headline announcing that “The Bracero Problem Is Minor and Unimportant,” quoting Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, then an upper-echelon government official under Ruiz Cortines and later president of Mexico (1964–1970). According to Díaz Ordaz, “a great deal of information concerning the braceros in northern Mexico has been exaggerated. . . . Truth has been sacrificed to sensationalism, magnifying a problem that is basically minor and unimportant. Such information is worthless” (*El Universal*, Jan. 30, 1954). Of course, his opinion, though interesting, was not supported by the facts.

Another editorial, this one from *El Nacional*, used a different technique, also employed to downplay the confrontations taking place along the border. “The nation patriotically applauds and supports President Ruiz Cortines,” it stated; according to an “official statement [it continued], hundreds of ‘wetbacks’ who had entered the United States illegally have now turned back into Mexico, into the nation that values them and does not want to see them despised abroad, confirming that the appeals of the authorities and the brotherly wishes of the Mexican people are being heeded by the would-be braceros” (*El Nacional* 1954).

The Mexican press also abstained from publishing photographs (which did appear, however, in the *Times*) of the clashes taking place in Mexicali and other border areas. Another curious aspect of the coverage was that two dailies, *Excélsior* and *El Universal*, also published cables from international news agencies that belied the official declarations appearing on their front pages. Although these cables were buried in the back pages, the contradiction was immediately apparent to any careful reader (see, for example, *Excélsior*, Jan. 24–30, 1954).

A few months later, economic and political considerations led Washington to reverse its policy, and all illegal workers were expelled from the United States in “Operation Wetback” in the summer of 1954. This vast operation transported Mexicans via specially chartered planes, trains, and buses to deep within Mexican territory (NYT, June 21 and Aug. 7, 1951). By this time, the Mexican government had also changed its mind, and it acquiesced to the repatriation of illegal migrants. In exchange, the United States agreed to hire greater numbers of the legal braceros.
**Facets of the Relationship**

**LATER DEVELOPMENTS**

The migration of Mexican workers into the United States highlighted the weaknesses in the economic model adopted by the Mexican elite as well as the United States’ dependency on imported labor, leading both parties to seek a structural solution. Proposals that failed to address both the problems characterizing Mexico’s development and the United States’ economic dependency upon Mexican workers proved hopelessly inadequate.

The migration issue reemerged with some intensity during the early 1960s, when renewal of the Bracero agreement was being debated. The agreement was ultimately terminated, in December 1964, but migration did not stop; it simply became undocumented. Whether legal or illegal, according to the U.S. perspective, Mexican labor migration remained purely an internal matter. Lobbyists for the agricultural sector continued to win important legislative victories in Congress (so much so that one secretary of labor referred to them as the toughest pressure group he had ever come across (NYT, July 29, 1960), while other sectors became increasingly critical of the migrants’ poor living and working conditions (letters to the editor, NYT, July 21, 23, 1960). The Mexican government continued to call for respect for the migrants’ human and workers’ rights, although after 1954 it would never again directly oppose American will on this issue.

The *Times* frequently criticized growers for their lack of respect for migrant workers’ rights, although the paper did recognize that these migrants were competing with domestic workers for jobs during an economic recession, which, the *Times* maintained, was reason enough to tighten controls on their presence (NYT 1960a–c, 1961a, 1963a–b, 1964a). In any case, the number of negative references to migration fell sharply, while the number of informative references rose (figures 63–64), reflecting a growing awareness of migration’s true nature. An article from 1961 (whose author surely took the Cuban Revolution into consideration) suggested that suspending the Bracero agreement would have “a serious impact upon Mexico” (NYT, Oct. 5, 1961).

The realization that any changes in the migratory flow would affect both Mexico and the United States began to gain currency and was widespread by the 1970s. Although this was some acknowledgment of the two nations’ interdependence, the United States would continue to act unilaterally in migration-related matters, using coercion “when necessary.”

**CONCLUSION**

The four issue areas discussed in this chapter clearly speak to the complexity of the bilateral relationship. Although each case would
seem to be ruled by a different logic, all in fact pivot around an implicit accord to provide mutual support in times of need.

Another aspect that comes through very clearly is the marked pragmatism of Mexico's foreign policy. The Mexican elite abandoned both Arbenz and the migrant workers, but they succeeding in isolating the Mexican army from the United States and in preserving State control over the petroleum industry. Given the asymmetrical power relations between the two countries, the Mexican side came out quite well. Their strategy may have been the best available for expanding Mexico's room for maneuver, especially in light of the unilateralism that characterized U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War, for, as the migration question demonstrates, when the United States decided to employ coercion, Mexico had little defense.