The Myth of Mexican Democracy

Throughout the Cold War, most Americans believed that the Mexican system was (almost) a democracy. This was an exaggeration, a myth, brought about by lacunas in knowledge. Understanding this myth will help us comprehend how the U.S. elite managed information, molding it to fit preconceived ideas while simultaneously maintaining a self-image of objectivity. This chapter also explores the effects of U.S. perceptions on Mexican authoritarianism.

The Ingredients of Mexican Authoritarianism

The Mexican political system reached maturity during the 1940s. The country was ruled by a group that governed through an effective combination of coercion and hegemony, flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. It had created a convincing democratic facade, holding elections and tolerating the existence of opposition parties—although these were rigorously controlled. The opposition was weak and disorganized, and international interest in Mexico was scant. Washington’s priorities for Mexico were economic growth and political stability, along with a friendly relationship between the Mexican regime and the United States. The U.S. elite cared little about how these objectives were to be achieved.

One reason for Mexico’s political stability was the cohesiveness of the group in power, whose members shared a flexible worldview inherited from the Mexican Revolution. They were a disciplined group, adhering unquestioningly to a set of ambiguous rules (interpreted by the president and his party) that frequently diverged from both the letter and the spirit of the law. This cohesion was also nourished by a more mundane element: the “Mexican Dream”—the belief that the elite have an innate right to enrich themselves through public office.
The regime's solidity also derived from the (passive or active) support of organized sectors of the population that took part in the nation's public life. Economic growth enabled the government to distribute benefits widely, silencing some of these organized groups' complaints. Although the distribution of power was profoundly unequal, the population as a whole looked forward to an ever brighter future, part of the mythology of the Mexican Revolution. The revolutionary governments of this era—which used repression with great caution (a lesson learned from the Revolution) and relied more on hegemony—skilfully controlled the flow of information and knowledge. This was achieved through complex webs of legal and illegal mechanisms: these governments monopolized the production and sale of newsprint, awarded radio and television station concessions to individuals or groups close to the PRI, and established an efficient system to co-opt and/or corrupt journalists and intellectuals, thereby allowing the government to regulate which stories reached the public.

Despite such controls, Mexico continued to beget its share of skeptics, including journalists, intellectuals, and popular and peasant leaders. The government traditionally took sophisticated steps to restrain such individuals and the groups that coalesced around them. When opposition opinions surfaced, the government's first reaction was calculated indifference, accompanied by close scrutiny of their proponents' intentions and capabilities. Individuals or groups who showed signs of becoming a potential threat were subjected to even closer scrutiny. The regime was known for studying its opponents with great care (the limits of what level of opposition is permissible varied by regime). The government's customary response was to meet some of a group's demands while quietly trying to co-opt its leadership, playing to any uncovered weaknesses. They enticed a leader with symbols of prestige or invited him to join in the "Mexican Dream"—that is, to feed at the public trough. If these enticements were ineffective, the government activated its strategy of suffocation and containment. It tried to splinter the group and/or to establish parallel groups with similar goals, thereby creating confusion. The media, tightly controlled by the regime, played a central role in this part of the strategy.

If an opposition group continued to gain strength, the government deployed a wide variety of harassing tactics: tax audits, loss of employment, incarceration, death threats, and so on. Pressure intensified in proportion to the threat's perceived magnitude until, in extreme cases, the government physically removed the threat, usually through murder or "disappearance" and, in some cases, through indiscriminate repression. These stages varied from state to state. A comparison

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These concessions are renewed periodically.
of some of the best known instances of state violence indicated that workers or peasants were more frequently repressed than were the professional, middle classes. The government includes institutions that have specialized in coercion. Until the 1970s, the army was frequently used in rural areas and against large public demonstrations. Selective repression (ranging from harassment to murder) was carried out by the feared Federal Security Directorate created by Miguel Aleman in 1947 and disbanded in 1985. The DFS was followed in importance by federal, state, and municipal police forces and a number of paramilitary groups.

This combination of hegemony and coercion peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. In later years the government's efficacy in this area was curtailed as independent media and organizations gained strength and experience, and especially after the severe blow that the July 1997 elections inflicted to the government's structure of control. The United States has played a central role in the history of Mexican authoritarianism, as can be seen if we explore the U.S. elite's changing perceptions of Mexico between 1946 and 1960.

THE UNITED STATES' LOGIC

The U.S. State Department had clear goals for Latin America: it sought to "propel an orderly evolution toward democracy throughout the hemisphere," thus establishing a continent where "everybody accepts and practices . . . the same political, social, and economic principles [as the United States]" (DOS 1952: 24). Scholars and journalists agreed with this objective. Times editorials advised the U.S. government to guide Latin Americans, to help them acquire "as much insight as they can get into the 'political and philosophical' forces that the world's most fortunate nation relies on" (NYT 1956b). According to Robert Scott (1959) and others, the United States should serve as a "political prototype" for other nations. Democracy, it was argued, entailed adopting a "political system along the lines of the United States and the United Kingdom" (Lagos 1977: 27), the logic being that these Anglo-Saxon nations had developed the "institutions of partici-

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1The cases examined include the repression in Leon (1946), Guerrero (1960 and 1967), and San Luis Potosi (1961), among others. Also studied were the railroad workers' strike of 1958 and the physicians' movement of 1964-65. The single exception to this generalization was the student movement of 1968.

2The increased openness that resulted is a dual phenomenon, which can be both economic and political: external groups' increased attention on Mexican affairs and an increased number of Mexican actors who are willing to establish contact with their foreign counterparts. This presupposes, of course, not only their willingness to establish contact but also the existence of laws that allow them to do so.
pating" (such as voting) that make democracy work (Lerner 1958: 60). The enemies of democracy were readily identifiable: nationalists like Juan Domingo Perón, or the Communists who were, according to the State Department, exploiting "instabilities, deficiencies, and demagoguery" (DOS 1952: 3).

Proceeding from these ideas, Americans arrived at certain remarkable conclusions. As a Times correspondent noted in 1952, "very few, if any, are willing to pretend that democracy actually exists [in Mexico]" (NYT, Feb. 2, 1952). A 1958 editorial acknowledged that the Mexican political system "is not quite like ours" (NYT 1958a). However, such warnings went unheeded, and optimism prevailed. During this period, the "general political balance" variable registered 107 positive references, versus 24 negative; the "political democratization" variable received 65 approvals against 7 condemnations (figures 35–37). In fact, Mexico was even paraded as a role model for other countries (NYT 1957a).

Such optimism grew out of the U.S. elite's belief that Mexico was gradually coming to resemble the United States. Scott suggested that Mexico was becoming "systematized into a working political culture in the Western sense"; he concluded that even if Mexico did not yet "have a 'perfect' political system," the country had nonetheless "fulfilled the most basic requirements for a Western political system" (1959: 17, 32). His diagnosis was founded on a number of observations. One was the existence of a Mexican middle class, which provided the "broad basis required for moderate or center-weighted parties." The U.S. elite felt that class differences "would gradually diminish until, as is the case in the United States, almost everyone belongs emotionally, albeit not economically, to the middle classes." Enthusiasm for the middle classes and their social role grew, nourished by the notion that, as suggested by Seymour Lipset, a "large middle class [that] tempers conflict by rewarding moderate and democratic parties and penalizing extremist ones" could serve as a solid buffer against political radicalism (1963: 51).

The existence of political parties and elections also contributed to U.S. optimism. A Times correspondent felt that political parties were "all to the good in the opinion [of those] interested in seeing the country evolve toward political democracy, as the term is understood in the United States" (NYT, Feb. 2, 1952). For Scott, the existence of elections made "Mexico's political process a great deal more like that of the United States than appears on the surface" (1959: 29).

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1 That is, with a separation of powers, regular rotation of government officials via free and transparent elections, political parties, and so on.

2 American investors claimed at least partial credit for the expansion of Mexico's middle class. Sears Roebuck, for example, was congratulated for helping to improve "social and economic conditions" in Mexico.
PRESIDENTS AND EVASIVE STRATEGIES

Neither Mexico’s middle classes, nor its political parties, nor its elections have the pivotal quality of the presidency, and Americans are well aware of this fact. During the four decades covered by the content analysis, Mexican presidents were mentioned on 2,360 occasions, while members of the docile legislature were mentioned 348 times, and the judiciary only 80 times (figure 18). For the United States, the first and foremost concern regarding an incoming Mexican president is his ideological orientation. With each succeeding PRI nomination, a question resurfaces that was posed as follows in 1946 by Times correspondent Milton Bracker: “Will Ávila Camacho’s successor [Miguel Alemán] lead a return to the era of Cárdenas, sweeping the nation toward the left, or will his policies be center-oriented?” (see figure 19 for the answer). Of Mexico’s seven presidents in office between 1946 and 1986, the four most praised—and least criticized—in the Times were Alemán, Ruiz Cortines, Díaz Ordaz, and López Mateos, in that order. Together, these four administrations cover the years from 1946 to 1970.

From 1946 to 1960, Americans had the opportunity to evaluate three Mexican presidents. Miguel Alemán they viewed as having “moderate right-wing tendencies.” Adolfo Ruiz Cortines was believed to be “a moderate . . . who has always expressed an unequivocal friendship towards the United States” (NYT, Nov. 17, 1957). And López Mateos, “despite his close trade union ties, personifies the rising middle classes,” according to Daniel James. James went on to predict that López Mateos would “probably keep to the Center already well furrowed by Ruiz Cortines” (James 1958; see also NYT, Nov. 17, 1956).

Based on these diagnoses, the U.S. elite treated these four presidents well, even though such treatment was not always deserved. When discrepancies appeared between the U.S. vision and events on the ground in Mexico, the American elites merely resorted to a number of evasive mechanisms: disassociation, the manipulation of time distinctions, an enduring faith in the perfectibility of Mexican politicians, selective criticism, and silence about the role played by the United States.

Disassociation came into play in media coverage of electoral processes. Mexico’s official party has rarely hesitated to use fraud to win closely contested elections. In the 1946 and 1952 presidential elections, when the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party faced stiff competition, the regime resorted to a variety of irregular practices in order to ensure its candidates’ success. Despite the electoral irregularities, the

*For an analysis of this era, see Medina 1979.
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*Times* legitimated the winners. One way to smooth over this contradiction was to disassociate the PRI candidates from the elections' more negative elements, blaming the long-vilified caciques for the irregularities. The United States has always condemned Mexico's caciques (figures 40, 44), whom Paul Kennedy described as holding "life-and-death power, [ruling by] the power of their own pistols and those of their followers." Another correspondent stated that caciques had been "notably evil for centuries." By asserting that the caciques had no "particular loyalty toward the PRI or its candidate Alemán" and that if they appeared to support him, this was for purely "personal reasons" (NYT, Jan. 19, 1946; Oct. 26, 1958), the journalists could isolate the candidate from certain of his supporters. This logic has been adapted to present-day circumstances by observers who viewed presidents from Echeverría to Zedillo as reformers struggling against political "dinosaurs" [entrenched old-timers], without realizing that presidents and caciques, technocrats and dinosaurs, are all part of a single system, although they fulfill different functions within it.

Another technique commonly employed to mitigate discrepancies between perception and reality has been to adjust time distinctions: the present is always better than the past, and there is always hope for the future. (When a commentator wishes to condemn something, the order is reversed.) During Mexico's 1946 presidential election, Virginia Lee Warren indignantly described the "tricks that have been used in the past in order to violate the will of the people" (emphasis added). She noted that there were "good reasons to believe" that the 1946 elections would be different (NYT, June 30, 1946).

In an editorial examining the 1952 election, the *Times* predicted that if Mexico did not swerve from its present course, it could become "even more democratic," and that "six or twelve years from now" Mexicans would have "a real electoral choice to make for President" (NYT 1952a). Another editorial added the following: Mexico is on a "long, hard, and slow climb toward true democracy. . . . It would be naive to expect a nation that knew nothing but chaos, bloodshed and revolutions throughout a century, to become a democracy in Anglo-Saxon style overnight" (NYT 1952b). This belief is premised on an almost religious faith in the perfectibility of Mexican politicians, who need only promise major reforms or carry out some symbolic action and they are believed, or at least granted the benefit of the doubt. The U.S. elite is notable for its willingness to believe official Mexican interpretations without running a reality check, as they would in their own public arena.

One of the clearest examples of this can be seen in the media's extremely selective coverage and treatment of corruption. Between 1946 and 1947, there were 33 references in the *Times* to corruption in Mex-
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ico. Between 1948 and 1951 there were only 6, and in 1952 and 1953 the number of references soared again, to a total of 36 (figures 91, 93). That is, during the peak of Miguel Alemán’s power and influence (1948–1951), the Times maintained a discreet silence regarding the blatant corruption that characterized this regime. As Alemán’s presidency drew to a close, this discretion vanished and criticism reappeared. In an editorial from 1952, the Times declared that “it would be dishonest to turn a blind eye on the extraordinary degree of corruption in high circles [in Mexico]” (NYT 1952c). A year later, correspondent Sidney Gruson explored the “former President’s practice of enriching his personal cronies” (Mar. 24, 1953). That same year, an editorial voiced the perception that would become widespread during the 1980s: “graft and corruption [have become] a part of the Mexican system” (NYT 1953). That is, corruption was a structural, and no longer an incidental, phenomenon.

The differential treatment of corruption was also evident in the coverage of the Mexican presidents’ periodic, though ineffectual, campaigns against it. When Ruiz Cortines initiated one such program, a Times correspondent announced the birth of “promising new era . . . for Mexico,” adding that Ruiz Cortines was a “wise man” carrying out a clean-up campaign “without recrimination for past regimes, and without trying to bring to justice all those guilty of bribery and corruption.” An in-depth cleanup of the system, he added, would have been “an impossible task [which] would have sent asunder the gov­erning party” (NYT, Dec. 29, 1952). A further editorial, which acknowledged that the Alemán regime had been guilty of “some corruption and some abuses of power,” nonetheless concluded with a call for patience, suggesting that the system would advance “toward liberal policies” of its own accord (NYT 1957b). Clearly the American elite deplored corruption—but only to the point where efforts to curtail it might threaten Mexico’s stability.

These evasive strategies would come into play in the future to deal with a variety of problems, such as abstentionism, popular demon­strations, and so on (see figures 35–38, 40–44). Tracing how these variables evolved will allow us to detect changes in U.S. perceptions of Mexico.

THREATS TO THE SYSTEM

The manner in which U.S. elites responded to threats against the Mexican political system confirms their support for Mexican authori­tarianism and allows us to appreciate the relevance of observing how sources are handled. Given its worldview, it comes as no surprise that the United States has always firmly opposed leftist politics. Between
1940 and 1960, criticism of the Mexican Left rose very sharply: the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) had 154 negative and only 2 positive references; the Popular Party (PP) had 57 references against and none in favor; and the left-wing opposition overall garnered 145 negative references versus 4 positive. Cold War paranoia greatly magnified the Left's importance: between 1946 and 1960, the PCM received more mentions than any other party, including the PRI (figures 28–33). This level of attention was hardly justified; the number of registered Communists in Mexico did not exceed 5,000 (Schmitt 1965: 33), and their political presence was minimal, although the Left was undoubtedly seeking to expand its popular support.

Attention to the Left was due to the extremely broad margins of security that the United States sought to establish. Although the National Security Council acknowledged that Communism in Latin America was "not seriously dangerous at the present time," in a more disquieting vein the State Department reasoned that Communism could become a "force which exploits and makes articulate nationalistic aspirations and which supplies organizational and directive guidance to all [anti-U.S.] elements" (NSC 1948a: part 2; DOS 1952: 10).

Nebulous or potential threats can serve to justify all sorts of excesses. During this era Communist conspiracies were seen at the root of an astonishingly broad range of ills (mirrored on the Left by a tendency to blame Yankee imperialism for most of the world's problems). For example, after a screening in Mexico of a film about racism in the United States, a demonstration ensued outside the theater. Correspondent Paul Kennedy's (unsubstantiated) interpretation was that the event revealed an "organized plan... to turn the showing of the film into political paths" (NYT, Oct. 20, 1958). He later added that it was "generally conceded" that Mexican criticism of the United States' racist policies was "the work of an organized clique" (NYT, Nov. 2, 1958).

The subtle nuances that can preserve objectivity dissipated in this extremist atmosphere, and this resulted in remarkably poor analytical treatment of certain Mexican opposition leaders. Vicente Lombardo Toledano was an archetypal nationalistic, leftist politician. As a union leader, he backed Miguel Alemán for the presidency. Later, after he was expelled from the official Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), he founded the Popular Party upon a bizarre mix of Marxist and nationalist theses. Both the still-extant Popular Party and its heir, the Socialist Popular Party (PPS), viewed U.S. imperialism as the greatest threat to Mexico and elected, therefore, to support the party in power, which was nationalistic (and which was subsidizing them). Lombardo Toledano and the PPS symbolize a domesticated, beholden
Left, which is as much a part of the Mexican political system as are the caciques.

Nonetheless, in 1947 U.S. intelligence services observed that even if Lombardo Toledano was not a self-avowed Communist, he was “regarded throughout the area as the Communists’ spokesman in labor affairs” (CIG 1947: 4). The Times agreed, pointing out that Lombardo Toledano’s distinction between Communism and Marxism was “a differentiation that hardly anyone in Mexican politics takes seriously.” The Americans were convinced that he was the “mentor of organized labor in Guatemala,” whose goal was “to organize a Latin American trade union federation tied to the Soviet leadership” (NYT, Feb. 17, 1952). Scott also considered Lombardo Toledano a Marxist (1959: 141).

The absence of shadings in the U.S. elite’s view of some Mexicans’ political orientation also affected General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, a member of the PRI who struck out on his own to challenge Ruiz Cortines in the 1952 presidential election (NYT, July 30, 1951). Henríquez was a right-winger, described initially, and fairly accurately, by the Times as a “good bourgeois conservative.” However, to win popular support for his candidacy—and demonstrating the ideological malleability that has characterized many Mexican politicians—he began to maneuver for an alliance with the Left in a move which, according to a Times correspondent, “had been inspired by Cominform.” The Times’s verdict continued to shift as Henríquez drifted through the political geometry in pursuit of the presidency, until he was ultimately classified as a leftist (NYT 1951e; Feb. 17, 1952).

The U.S. elite’s support for the established order was also reflected in Americans’ poor opinion of labor movements—which received 62 negative references and no positive mentions in the Times—and demonstrations, which were condemned on 25 occasions and approved in 7 instances. Government repression was covered 88 times but was censored on only 13 occasions—11 times by correspondent Camille Cianfarra, who reported on the January 1946 massacre in León (figures 40–43).

The government and media employed a number of techniques to condemn these independent movements. One, utilized in both Mexico and the United States, was to maintain silence regarding cases of repression. Another involved the handling of sources: official sources were quoted frequently, while opposition spokespersons were ignored or branded as Communists or instruments of Communists, usually without evidence. It would be absurd to deny the existence of a political Left in Mexico, or that it was hostile to the United States, or that it was present in certain opposition movements. However, this

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7On this subject, also see NYT, June 5, 1951; June 9, 1952; Jan. 1, 1953; Jan. 29, 1954.
does not justify the bias of U.S. journalists and academics who refused to recognize that popular discontent could also be a response to poverty, electoral fraud, or corruption.8

The U.S. press either ignored the opposition or, in some cases, justified its repression by the regime in power. The Times Mexico correspondent accepted the thesis that the Mexican oil workers who went on strike in 1947 were infiltrated by Communists, and he approved of Miguel Alemán’s harsh handling of the situation. He considered that bringing the full weight of “the law down upon the problematic oil-workers’ union” was a healthy move, and concluded that this could be “a culminating moment in Mexico’s handling of its oil-based resources” (NYT, Dec. 22, 1946). Shortly thereafter, Mexican banker Juan Monasterio boasted in the United States that, long before Truman’s campaign against Communism, “the Mexican President had ejected all Communists from power” (NYT, Apr. 12, 1947). It is interesting to note that because Lombardo Toledano supported Alemán during the strike, criticism of him eased temporarily (NYT, Dec. 24-25, 1946).

Coverage of peasant movements followed a similar pattern. Because the situation in the Mexican countryside was not a priority for the United States, and because foreign correspondents rarely left the capital, peasant movements received little attention during the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the correspondents’ lack of knowledge about the rural sector, they nevertheless condemned the peasant movements out of hand.

Most noteworthy was an article from 1954, which purported to cover Rubén Jaramillo, a peasant leader from the state of Morelos. Jaramillo had run for the state governorship during General Henríquez’s failed bid for the presidency, and he had organized a guerrilla movement in Morelos during the 1950s. He was described by the Times as a “hard-riding pistol-packing bandit in the old style who had been terrorizing the state of Morelos.” Jaramillo, stated the newspaper, was the leader of “a group of about 80 desperados” who wandered through the countryside as though “Pancho Villa had burst out of a movie screen back on to the Mexican landscape.” A “self-avowed revolutionary,” he was on some occasions “disguised as a priest, on others as a Protestant pastor.” He sometimes traveled on “a mule cart loaded with produce,” and at other times he “moved from place to place, along dusty lanes, in a long and shining Cadillac” (NYT, Mar. 13, 1954). This article, dense in adjectives and unfounded attacks, was completely lacking in objectivity though replete with historical inaccuracies. It perpetuated some of the most time-worn cowboy-thriller

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8For an examination of how some of these movements were reported, see NYT, May 17, Dec. 13, 1950; Oct. 1, 1954; Apr. 1, 18, 1956.
stereotypes of Mexican peasants as malevolent, violent, dirty, shabby, and dishonest, spending their days in lascivious contemplation of blond-haired, blue-eyed American beauties. Given the close collaboration between the CIA and the American press during this era, this may well have been a case of propaganda masquerading as news.

Fifteen years later, in 1969, as the anti-Communist hysteria that had gripped the United States was abating, a U.S. writer published a piece in the *Times* stating that “in 1962, a popular peasant leader, Rubén Jaramillo, his wife, and his three foster children were brutally slaughtered by the authorities” (Jellinek 1969). Such dissimilar treatments of a single individual foreshadow some of the changes in store regarding Mexico’s place within the consciousness of the U.S. elite.

**THE WORKERS’ PROTESTS OF 1958–1959**

Given such antecedents, the meager and rarely objective coverage of the popular and union movements of 1958–59 should come as no surprise. Protests were sparked by the telegraph workers in 1958. They were soon followed by a group of railroad workers, headed by Demetrio Vallejo, whose legitimacy the *Times* summarily dismissed. Toeing official guidelines, the *Times* declared that the agitators were leftists disowned by “the majority of workers,” that their strike was illegal, and that Vallejo was “close to Communist-infiltrated labor sectors.”

The specter of conspiracy, nourished through a skillful, engineered handling of sources, was a constant in *Times* dispatches. “Leftist elements,” it suggested, “are following the classic pattern of capitalizing on the culmination of unrest that has been boiling beneath the surface for years” (curiously, the *Times* had never noted or reported on this “boiling unrest”). As the movement gathered momentum among oil workers, professors, and students, the *Times* went on to affirm that this was “a coordinated action,” part of “a Leftist offensive” seeking to control the communications and transport sectors. The paper also criticized President López Mateos for capitulating to “the demands of the dissident forces led by Leftist organizers.”

One month after the railroad workers went on strike, the government, invoking national security, jailed the movement’s leaders and thousands of workers, filling their jobs with army recruits. *Times* correspondent Paul Kennedy applauded this move, stating that “the

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9This kind of stereotype has been examined in at least three doctoral dissertations: W. Anderson 1977, Paredes 1973, and Zelman 1969.

10The discussion of the railroad workers’ movement is based on articles appearing in the *Times* on Aug. 3–7, 26, 31, Sept. 2, 3, 7, 11, 19, and Nov. 11, 1958; and Apr. 2, 4, 7, 10, 12, 14, Oct. 4, and Nov. 8, 1959.
wildcat strike was a Communist plot," that Vallejo was linked to the Soviets (the Mexican government proceeded to expel a number of Soviet diplomats in a move designed to give credence to the conspiracy theory), and that the railroad leaders had attacked federal communication lines, corrupted authorities, hurt the national economy, and, in general, betrayed the nation.

After hundreds of workers had been incarcerated, Kennedy finally acknowledged that perhaps they had "[rebelled] against their leaders . . . after the national leadership announced that it would defer wage raise demands," that there was "serious contention among the rank and file union members over the legality" of the government-imposed Directive Committee, and that there were "indications that the government received unreliable information regarding the loyalty of the rank and file toward the leadership." Media efforts to describe these movements with some measure of objectivity were too little too late. In total, the railroad movement received 36 negative references in the Times, 17 informative references, and no positive ones (figure 41). The Mexican press employed similar tactics, although in a more overt manner, to undermine the workers and their movement (see Stevens 1974).

Robert Scott condemned the 1958 railroad movement as well, though from a different angle, stating that "the majority of Mexicans approve the apparent harshness of the President's relationship" with the railroad workers (Scott 1971: 304, emphasis added). Karl Schmitt also minimized the protests' legitimacy, stating that the strike had failed because of Vallejos's "senseless demands," which merely "led to political conflict, and his own downfall" (1965: 164). Scott produced no evidence for his affirmation that the "majority" of Mexicans approved of the government's policy. He may have consulted the Mexican media—Schmitt did so—but the Mexican papers carried only the official story. It is astonishing that these two serious academics could have been so naive as to trust the Mexican media. Furthermore, the harshness that Scott mentions was more than just "apparent"; the army occupied workplaces, fired thousands of laborers, and jailed hundreds more, including the leadership, who would remain in prison for years.¹

In the epilogue to the 1971 edition of his Mexican Government in Transition, Scott mentions that, after "being detained for a number of years, these men [the twenty-five leaders who were still incarcerated] went on trial. In 1963, they were found guilty of 'social dissolution', and condemned." This epilogue suffers from a lack of specifics. Scott fails to point out that the 1941 Law of Social Dissolution blatantly

¹Stevens provides an excellent reconstruction of the railroad workers' strikes; see Stevens 1974, especially chapter 4.
violated the most fundamental rights. Article 145 of this law estab-
lished prison sentences for any foreigner or Mexican who “verbally,
in writing, or through any other medium disseminates political
propaganda . . . containing ideas, programs, or forms of action . . .
that might alter public order, or the sovereignty of the Mexican state”

The Times also minimized the true nature of Mexican authoritari-
anism by quoting official sources almost exclusively. Between 1946
and 1960, the paper quoted 1,035 Mexican government officials and
only 149 members of the opposition (figures 8–11). These data also
contradict a prevalent American myth concerning Mexico. Although
Vincent Padgett claimed that Mexicans were reticent about speaking
to “foreigners, especially from the United States [and that] a good
relationship with Mexican politicians is not easily established” (L.V.
Padgett 1966: vii–viii), the figures attest to the fact that there was an
ongoing dialogue between the two elites. This was confirmed by an
anecdote from Miguel Alemán’s trip to the United States. In New
York, Alemán convinced Alejandro Carrillo (a Mexican politician and
publisher of El Popular newspaper, and known in the United States as
a Communist) to declare in a statement to the U.S. media that he was
not, and never had been, a member of the Communist Party (NYT,
May 4, 1947). Carrillo agreed to explain his political convictions to the
American press, in the process demonstrating the open dialogue be-
tween national elites, the discipline among Mexican politicians, and
the high degree of presidential control over the flow of ideas (and
over the dignity of individual politicians).

The customary practice of ignoring protests and overlooking re-
pression had a number of significant exceptions. Center or right-wing
movements did garner attention. When some fifty peasants from the
right-wing National Sinarchist Union (UNS) were murdered while
protesting electoral fraud in León, Guanajuato, in 1946, a Times corre-
spondent traveled to León and produced a fairly objective story, in
sharp contrast to the coverage of Jaramillo’s rebellion in Morelos.
The civic movement led by Dr. Salvador Nava in San Luis Potosí
was also covered extensively and solicitously (see, for example, NYT,
Dec. 8–9, 1958). A now somewhat more sympathetic Robert Scott
pointed out that Nava’s movement included “broad sectors of the
population, who had joined in order to expel deeply entrenched po-
itical leaders. . . . Social development has finally reached the point
where the general citizenry is no longer willing to tolerate the kind of
strong government that is still in place in certain local units, when
government on the national level is evolving into a more responsible
authority” (1959: 303). That is, the local leadership was condemned
and the national leadership was praised, despite the fact that both
formed part of a single, cohesive political system.
CONCLUSION

In summary, the U.S. elite was well disposed toward the Mexican government during the 1940s and 1950s, at the same time that it ignored, and sometimes reviled, the opposition. Overall, the importance of the opposition was minimized. However, among the opposition, center-right groups tended to be somewhat favored, while nationalistic or left-wing groups came in for the worst kind of prejudicial coverage. Evidently, Americans were unwilling to expand their potential consciousness through events that conflicted with their interests or worldview. To preserve their outmoded perceptions without losing the semblance of objectivity, Americans employed a number of mechanisms that would resurface repeatedly in subsequent years.

These incomplete or tainted assessments raise an obvious question: how did this situation affect the Mexican political system? Although many of these movements have been defunct for decades, one cannot help but wonder where more objectivity in reporting might have led. Clearly, independent or opposition movements stagnate without media coverage. In 1957, when Herbert Matthews interviewed Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra for the Times, he breathed life into Castro’s movement, which had been suffocating behind a wall of silence imposed by Cuba’s authoritarian regime (Matthews 1969). Mexico’s Rubén Jaramillo never caught the attention of the U.S. media. The thread of American indifference toward the struggles of Mexican society will reappear throughout this volume because it was one of the factors that sustained the myth of a well-consolidated Mexican regime in full control of a passive, resigned Mexican population.

The result was that the United States, the supposed champion of democracy and openness, became a jealous defender of an authoritarian regime, closed off from the outside world behind a barrier of nationalism. In exchange for its support of the Mexican regime, Washington gained a stable border on its southern flank. Thanks to a paucity of information, this situation prevailed in the United States throughout the 1940s and 1950s, but it would ultimately give way in the turbulent 1960s.