Myths and [mis] perceptions

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The Death of the Mexican Revolution

The economic model inherited from the Mexican Revolution, once presented as a viable alternative to socialism and capitalism, expired in 1985–1986. Its demise was not due to natural causes. Rather, the Mexican leadership had reached agreement with Washington to terminate its existence. In exchange, the PRI received U.S. support, infusing new strength into Mexico’s authoritarian system, which was showing serious signs of wear.

UNLOCKING THE MEXICAN ENIGMA

Because of some exceptional circumstances, both the number and the prominence of Times articles on Mexican affairs rose sharply over 1985 and 1986. Correspondents increased their annual production on Mexico by nearly 300 percent (figures 1, 6–7). John Bailey’s analysis of coverage of Mexican affairs by the New York Times, the Washington Post, and three television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) between 1979 and 1988 confirms this pattern, showing a remarkable increase in 1985 and 1986 and a return to the status quo ante in 1987 (Bailey 1989). This heightened attention corresponds to events that were drastically reshaping the Mexican system and the intense debate under way regarding its prospects for the future. In 1986, Peter Smith voiced U.S. sentiments when he noted that “Mexico is in the midst of a profound transition. . . . [W]here is Mexico going?” (p. 101).

Proffered answers ranged across an extremely broad spectrum. Some forecasts were apocalyptic. In 1985, Rex Applegate warned that Mexico displayed “all the necessary elements and conditions for a Communist take-over” (p. 87). Even sophisticated analysts such as

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1Nine percent of all front-page articles, as well as 10 percent of all editorials, printed during the period covered by the content analysis appeared in 1986.
Brian Latell, chief observer of Mexican affairs at the CIA, predicted that “Mexican stability will be threatened by a deepening crisis which is both economic and political” (1986: 3). Such extreme opinions were not generalized, however; most views of Mexico’s future were more optimistic. In 1984, the CIA concluded that “the majority of Mexicans still accepts the legitimacy of a system dominated by the PRI” (Harper’s 1987). In 1985, the State Department commissioned a number of studies that arrived at similar conclusions (Camp 1986). And a “national intelligence estimate”—the most complete form of intelligence analysis carried out by the U.S. government, leaked to the press in 1987—argued that under the most likely scenario the “Mexican political system will remain intact” (in Anderson and Atta 1987a, 1987b).

Despite this consensus, the attention of the U.S. elite focused once again on the need for economic and political reform in Mexico, and by 1985–1986 reform was an idea whose time had definitely arrived. Because any reform process would be administered by the PRI and the only viable opposition was the right-leaning PAN party, the United States was assured that Mexico would implement the kind of liberal economic policies that the elite explicitly, unanimously, and vociferously recommended (that is, demanded). The U.S. elite also believed that with the right kind of reform, Mexico would finally overcome all traces of its traditional anti-American nationalism and ultimately pursue economic integration with the United States. As it turned out, the United States had to exert significant pressure to bring about a transformation in Mexico’s economic system, and the issue of reform of the political system was relegated indefinitely to the background.

THE REEMERGENCE OF DRUG TRAFFICKING

Turbulence gripped Mexico in 1985, driven by the unleashing of a series of accumulated though completely unforeseen forces. The first sign of the approaching storm was the escalating trade in illegal narcotics. After the 1960s, drug trafficking as a variable in the bilateral relationship displayed dramatic and unpredictable peaks and valleys. From a total of 408 Times references to drug trafficking between Mexico and the United States, 191 appeared in 1985–86, and of a total of 153 negative references on this topic, 123 appeared during this same two-year span (figures 58, 66).

Following Operation Intercept and the 1976 agreement to exchange prisoners, drug-related issues had faded from the bilateral agenda. They made only rare appearances during the López Portillo presidency, probably because Mexico’s economic boom was fueling a surge of optimism in the United States that overshadowed any nega-
tive issues in the relationship. During this period, reports in the United States on Mexico's anti-drug programs usually applauded the Mexican authorities' efforts. This overall approval continued into the first two years of de la Madrid's term in office; and in 1984 a U.S. House committee concluded that "Mexico was the only country where the Government recognized its obligation to detect and eradicate the illicit cultivation of narcotic crops," an observation that "greatly pleased the Mexican Government officials" (NYT, Sept. 13, 1984).

But praise abruptly gave way to condemnation. In November 1984, Mexican authorities—tipped off by U.S. agents—raided El Búfalo Ranch in Chihuahua State and confiscated over 10,000 tons of marijuana in the largest marijuana seizure in history. The drug dealers were quick to retaliate; in February 1985 they seized Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena and his pilot, Alfonso Zavala, in Guadalajara.

When Camarena and Zavala failed to surface, the U.S. media speculated that the kidnappers "may be working under the protection of local Guadalajara officials" (NYT, Feb. 22, 1985). Mexico was criticized as never before. The United States' response was not limited to oratory; both the U.S. Customs Service and the DEA increased the pressure on Mexico and closed the border to bring their point home. The collapse of relations on the border was dramatic (see figure 62).

In early March 1985, the tortured bodies of Camarena and Zavala were found in Michoacán. Secretary of State George Shultz declared that the United States' "level of tolerance has been exceeded" (NYT, Mar. 8, 1985). This—the strongest public statement in many decades—signaled a fundamental shift in the United States' attitude—and in the bilateral understanding. U.S. Ambassador to Mexico John Gavin publicly affirmed that at least two of Camarena's kidnappers were Mexican policemen (NYT, Mar. 16, 1985).

There were other indications of U.S. displeasure. Although Washington had referred publicly to the complicity between drug dealers and some government officials as early as 1969, the U.S. government never revealed the names of the twenty Mexicans against whom it claimed to have evidence. In 1985, on the other hand, it released the names of state governors, chiefs of police, ministers, and even relatives of the president alleged to be involved with criminal organizations. In April 1985, Ambassador Gavin stated that he could not have "full confidence in the honesty and integrity of De la Madrid's Cabinet," adding that "at least one Cabinet member and the

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³The Times published its highest number of hostile declarations in 1985; see figure 66.
son of a Cabinet member may have links to drug traffickers” (NYT, Apr. 30, 1985).

Mexican officials were vehement in their country’s defense. In 1985, the number of Mexican officials and scholars quoted in the Times rose sharply, as did the number of correspondents willing to interview them (figure 10). There was a corresponding increase in anti-American sentiment in Mexico (figure 94). Although these data reflect genuine Mexican anger, they also reflect the fact that the Mexican government played on this anger, using nationalism as a rallying cry against Yankee interventionism. Such calls for national unity could still produce results; a number of Mexican intellectuals rushed to their government’s defense in the U.S. press (see, for example, Castañeda 1985).

As 1985 wore on, U.S. displeasure with Mexico began to ease, apparently because there were signs that the Mexican government was showing increased willingness to cooperate. In November 1985, U.S. government officials once again were expressing satisfaction with the Mexican government, which was “increasing its overall effort and cracking down on corruption” (NYT, Nov. 10, 1985).

OTHER DRUG-RELATED MATTERS

Camarena’s assassination coincided with certain changes in the U.S. elite’s perception of the drug issue. Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign tacitly acknowledged that demand was part of the problem. Mexico may have helped bring about this transformation; Ambassador Gavin acknowledged that “[the Mexicans] are right” regarding the importance of demand (NYT, May 14, 1986). A Times editorial also noted that “the problem truly begins with the demand for drugs in the United States” (NYT 1985b).

Camarena’s assassination also reaffirmed U.S. perceptions that the entire Mexican system was riddled with corruption (figure 93). His murder revealed two divergent U.S. attitudes, which are still in place. On one side were those who called for intensifying the pressure on Mexico, arguing that official corruption was so widespread and damaging to the United States that only a very firm hand could compel the Mexican government to carry out in-depth reform. And on the other side were those who opposed harsh or explicit sanctions that would, they warned, aggravate the economic crisis, reduce the regime’s legitimacy, tarnish the bilateral relationship, and curtail Washington’s influence. The wisest course of action—according to this second camp, which ultimately prevailed—was to stick to the rules of the unwritten understanding, urging the Mexican regime into ever broader concessions.
A paradoxical consequence of the Camarena affair was that it accelerated the breakdown of the government's authoritarian controls over Mexican society. De la Madrid's 1985 decision to dissolve the Federal Security Directorate—the regime's most important political police force but also a key source of protection for drug dealers—came largely as a result of pressure from the United States. This proved to be a decisive step in the loosening of authoritarian control mechanisms. With the demise of the DFS, the Mexican government lost a central piece of its coercion machine, and this coincided with a reevaluation within the armed forces regarding the wisdom—or convenience—of using troops to repress independence or opposition movements. Coercion is an essential element in any authoritarian regime; when it ceases to be employed, the population becomes less afraid and dissident groups and ideas begin to emerge and coalesce. Thus it was that Washington, acting in line with its own interests, unwittingly contributed to the liberalization of the Mexican political system by attacking the corruption that pervaded its security forces.

**ELECTIONS AND THE ECONOMY**

Elections for the Mexican Congress and for the governorship of Sonora in 1985 were marred by irregularities masterminded by the central government. In follow-up coverage, the *Times* ran a series about the lack of democracy in Mexico. In fact, 50 percent of all negative opinions on electoral fraud registered for the entire period of the content analysis appeared in 1985-86 (figures 35, 38). Richard Meislin, *Times* correspondent from 1983 until mid-1985, may have contributed to this focus. More critical of Mexico than was Alan Riding, Meislin devoted an article in late 1984 to a PAN leader from Hermosillo who claimed to have compiled a list of more than 100 different techniques the PRI used to perpetrate electoral fraud (NYT, Dec. 2, 1984). The U.S. media's willingness to notice and report on the more negative aspects of Mexican politics became increasingly evident. For example, "Foreign journalists observing the elections on Sunday found several seeming abnormalities in voting procedures. In one case, acting on a tip, a group stopped a taxicab and found three ballot boxes full of uncounted votes on the back seat" (NYT, July 9, 1985).

The *Times* editorial line as a whole grew increasingly critical during 1985-86. Addressing the 1985 elections, for example, the paper asserted that "Mexico's democratic system . . . is an undemocratic anomaly. Citizens may vote for parties of their choice, but only one of them, the PRI, is allowed to win. This puts Mexico in the uncomfortable company of Chile, Haiti, Paraguay, Cuba and Nicaragua" (NYT 1985c).
The 1985 elections in Sonora and Nuevo León were obviously fraudulent. Sam Dillon, of the *Miami Herald*, noted that "not a single independent observer believes in the official results." The *Washington Post*’s Robert McCartney was equally direct: "many reporters observed even less regard for the law and democratic procedure in Sonora than in recent elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua" (in Bailey 1989: 5). Such unfettered criticism reflected priorities on international agendas, which—informed by Reagan-era ideologies—now viewed democracy as a fundamental legitimating factor for political systems.

Attitudes and priorities were changing on other fronts as well. In 1983 and 1984 the government of Miguel de la Madrid had been lauded for its strict enforcement of IMF austerity policies (figures 67–70). But in 1985 there were calls for another round of reforms of the economic model. In early 1985 a foreign investment analyst noted that the Mexican government’s "flexibility" toward foreign investment "pleased the United States." However, he went on, this would no longer suffice: "the Government says, Yeah, we wrote the law, but it doesn’t work, so don’t worry about it. Well, we worry about it. American businessmen want things laid out 1 to 10 and A to Z" (NYT, Jan. 19, 1985). This quote is particularly indicative of a growing concern in the United States: as Mexico’s economic instability intensified, the American business community began calling for reforms that would protect their investments, and that meant a more thoroughgoing reform of Mexico’s economic and legislative systems.

U.S. impatience intensified as the Mexican economy continued to deteriorate (NYT, Feb. 11, 1985). By July 1985, inflation was skyrocketing, growth was lagging, the peso was losing ground vis-à-vis the dollar, and the price for exported crude oil was plummeting. In this worsening context, certain previously ignored links were suddenly explicitly clear. In August the *Times* noted that "while both sides have been careful not to link economic aid with the anti-drug-trafficking effort, the Mexicans knew that the price for substantial economic concessions would be promises of greater efforts to stem the flow of drugs" (NYT, Aug. 17, 1986). Far from being ignored, the linking of aid would be broadened to encompass a number of other issues.

By early September the economic situation had turned desperate. Mexico announced that it would request new negotiations with the international banks and offer further concessions. One analyst of Mexican affairs noted that "no previous Mexican President has gone so far to meet the needs and demands of the United States," and he wondered whether "he could go further" (NYT, Sept. 2, 1985). The Mexican government was indeed willing to go much, much further. In fact, it would accept any concession, no matter how harsh, as long as the ruling elite was allowed to remain in power.
THE 1985 EARTHQUAKES

Two brutally damaging earthquakes shook Mexico on September 19, 1985. The first was a geological event that devastated broad sections of Mexico City’s historic downtown. Actually a series of earthquakes, this seismic activity could almost stand as a metaphor for the profound transformations under way in Mexican society at the time. The second earthquake was by nature international and financial. It was catalyzed by the United States’ announcement that its tolerance of Mexico’s economic policies had reached an end, and hence these policies would have to change.

The geological activity was ably covered by the Times, which published over sixty articles on the disaster, written with sensitivity and respect for the victims but without shying away from reporting on the endemic official corruption laid bare in the quakes’ horrific aftermath. The media noted that many of the collapsed buildings had failed to comply with even the most rudimentary construction codes. The macabre discovery of mutilated and tortured bodies in the basement of a building owned by the Mexican judicial police was also reported.

One consequence of the earthquakes was to cast the Mexican government’s indecisiveness and authoritarianism into sharp relief. An example was the government’s response to offers of assistance from the United States. The day after the quakes, the de la Madrid administration curtly informed Washington that it would “decline its offers of financial assistance.” Four days later, it accepted the proffered resources. A spokesperson for the Office of the President explained that the delay was due to an “incomplete understanding of the problem’s full extent and gravity” (NYT, Sept. 21–22, Oct. 24, 1985). This explanation is highly unsatisfactory; the enormity of the damage was more than evident immediately after the event.

Why did the Mexican government initially reject U.S. assistance? Was it arrogance, resentment, pride? Was it de la Madrid’s lack of leadership, or perhaps authoritarian inertia, that led him to seek to control every detail? It seems likely that all these factors played a part in that early decision. Whatever the reason, how the government responded in the earthquakes’ aftermath made the deterioration of its mechanisms of control painfully apparent.

September 19, 1985, was also symbolic in that it marked the first anniversary of the independent Mexico City newspaper La Jornada, which had survived despite tremendous financial difficulties and government harassment. This paper, which would become the key forum for social groups that appeared during the emergency, also provided the most steady coverage of new actors such as the “coordinating committees” (coordinadoras) of urban, peasant, and teachers’ movements (Haber 1994: 282).
To curtail the influence of the new social organizations operating in Mexico, the country's Ministry of Tourism insisted that all emergency assistance coming from abroad be channeled through Mexico's Embassy or consulates, rather than through other organizations (NYT, Sept. 22, 1985). The government directive went largely unheeded; many foundations put resources directly into the hands of the independent organizations, significantly enhancing their position in the process.

The second earthquake of September 19, 1985, was the financial one. By that date, Washington had concluded that Mexico was "no longer adhering to the austerity program accorded with the IMF." The implications were immediate and devastating: Mexico would lose "900 million dollars in assistance from the Fund," which would "greatly complicate its relationship with the international banking system" (NYT, Oct. 20, 1985). In other words, Mexico would soon be bankrupt. To demonstrate its sensitivity toward the geological tragedy that had just befallen Mexico, the IMF judiciously agreed to postpone imposing sentence for a few weeks; an IMF delegation didn't arrive until late October "to discuss Mexico's economic problems" (NYT, Oct. 31, 1985). Although the full story of these tense and drawn-out negotiations has never been made public, what was clearly being decided was the future configuration of Mexico's political and economic system.

Indications as to the nature of these confidential negotiations soon surfaced. In November 1985, the Mexican government announced that it would apply for entrance into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a move hailed by U.S. diplomats and analysts as one of Mexico's boldest moves in decades (NYT, Dec. 9, 1985). No one mentioned that by entering the GATT, Mexico was fulfilling an old desire of the United States. 4

The Christmas of 1985 was a bitter one for official Mexico. Throughout that winter, oil prices plummeted, dragging the peso down with them. The government's options were so few that, despite the crisis, it decided in January 1986 not to join other oil-producing nations in a joint strategy to raise international crude oil prices. The Times reported that Mexico made this decision for two reasons: to minimize the impacts on the Mexican economy, and to avoid "offending the United States," the main beneficiary of the falling oil prices (NYT, Jan. 23, 1986). In February 1986 Mexico cut its price for a barrel of crude by $8.65, bringing the country "to the brink of eco-

4Julián Nava must have allowed himself a satisfied smile. Five years earlier, when the López Portillo government had decided not to enter into the GATT, Nava, then U.S. ambassador to Mexico, declared that "sooner or later" Mexico would be forced to reverse its decision. The Mexican ruling elite condemned Nava's statement as further evidence of "United States intimidation" (NYT, May 15, 1980).
nomic disaster" (NYT, Feb. 15, 1986). U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz declared that Mexico, the IMF, and the international banking system were making every effort to “prevent a Mexican financial collapse” (NYT, Feb. 10, 1986). With each passing week, it became increasingly evident that Mexico would have to reach some new accord with international financial institutions.

**REINING IN THE ECONOMIC MODEL**

In order to appreciate fully the degree of pressure being exerted by the United States on Mexico, we must look to the broader context. Mexico’s policy toward Central America was probably the primary, but not the only, irritant to the Reagan administration; other contentious issues were drug trafficking, Mexico’s failed economic model, electoral fraud, and de la Madrid’s lack of leadership. Concern on these specific topics intermingled with general concern for Mexico’s stability—and for what repercussions a loss of stability in Mexico might have on U.S. security just as conservatives were trying to influence the global balance of power.

It is very difficult to reconstruct those months with any detail. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt as to the anger that the U.S. elite felt toward Mexico. It was much in evidence throughout the congressional hearings convened by Senator Jesse Helms in May 1986, when high-ranking government officials issued a series of blistering accusations against the Mexican government, citing corruption, collaboration with drug cartels, electoral fraud, and administrative ineptitude.

William Von Raab, United States Customs Service commissioner, observed that the drug problem had become “a horror story, increasing logarithmically,” and that Mexico was “doing nothing about it.” The situation, he added, was “totally out of control” and was only aggravated further by “inept and corrupt” Mexican authorities. Von Raab also suggested that his view was shared by “the entire executive branch of Government” (NYT, May 12, 1986). Other prominent members of Reagan’s cabinet, including Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, expressed similar opinions.

The White House soon received a strongly worded note of protest from an enraged Mexican government. An unidentified “senior Mexican official”—probably the minister of foreign affairs—was quoted in the Times to the effect that Washington’s response to the note would “most likely determine the future course of [bilateral] relations” (NYT, May 15, 1986). Although there is no reason to doubt the sincerity or patriotism of the anonymous author of this prognostication, it was empty bluster, no more. The Mexican leadership, by then utterly
dependent on the U.S. government for its survival, was forced to accept even the harshest American criticism with good grace.

Succeeding events followed a well-trodden path. Once again the Mexican leadership assumed a nationalistic pose for the benefit of its domestic audience, secure in the knowledge that it was in the United States' own interest to help maintain a facade of Mexican autonomy. The Mexican population was informed that Elliott Abrams had sent a conciliatory letter to the Mexican government and that the U.S. attorney general had held a fruitful telephone conversation with his Mexican counterpart (NYT, May 25, 1986). The Mexican press reported that the nation's sovereignty was intact, with the White House collaborating actively in this whitewash: Attorney General Edwin Meese publicly criticized the comments of Commissioner Von Raab. The Times observed that "the Mexicans were delighted; they had stood up to the giant, they concluded, and the giant had backed down" (NYT, June 1, 1986).

There were other, significantly different interpretations, however. Mexico's note of protest, on which the future of the relationship supposedly hinged, was interpreted by the Times as a maneuver designed to "pacify internal opposition" (Aug. 3, 1986). U.S. officials, who chose to remain anonymous, noted that if Washington had indeed given Mexico's official nationalism a boost, this was only because "Mexicans are exceptionally sensitive to criticisms from the United States" and because the contentious atmosphere might make it "difficult to carry through with some important initiatives" (NYT, May 25, 1986). This reasoning was developed further in a Times observation that Washington had eased up on Mexico because "Mexico's problems can have serious impact not only in Mexico but also in the United States," and "the more stable and confident the system is," the easier it would be to push through the reforms that the White House desired (NYT, Aug. 13, 1986).

This interpretation was, in fact, exactly on target. With its image untarnished, the Mexican government did everything in its power to allay U.S. concerns, although in as discreet a manner as possible. Mexico signed an accord in June 1986 that allowed "six United States airplanes with civilian pilots under contract to the State Department" to take part in a program designed "to eradicate opium fields," noting only that their participation was "unusual" (NYT, July 18, 1986). Washington, hoping to take full advantage of the Mexican government's cooperative stance, also sought permission for U.S. agents to "chase drug smugglers up to 100 miles into Mexican territory" (NYT, Aug. 14, 1986). This request, intended to authorize agents "in hot pursuit" to enter Mexico, was never approved and it is still a contentious point between the two countries.
However, by early summer of 1986 the U.S. elite had reason to hope for far more than concessions in the area of anti-drug measures. The statements of high-ranking U.S. officials testifying about Mexico in the Helms hearings revealed the existence of a new strategy to address definitively several features of this traditionally problematic country. These officials sought to impose a new economic model, curtail the country’s independent diplomatic initiatives, and, if at all possible, create conditions conducive for extending democracy without threatening stability. Participants in the Helms debates have suggested that Washington, after carefully evaluating Mexico’s presidential succession, had decided to support Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

While Helms and his allies were attacking the Mexican government, there was an intense debate under way within the de la Madrid cabinet about how to deal with the economic crisis and the pressure being applied by the United States. Although there are many gaps in the information pertaining to this crucial period, its broad outlines are clear. By June 1986, Mexico’s negotiations with the United States had stalled, and Minister of Finance Jesús Silva Herzog was hinting that the only remaining alternative was a moratorium on debt payments, the option preferred by Mexico’s most nationalistic sectors (NYT, June 8, 1986). Soon thereafter, Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve, went to Mexico at Silva Herzog’s invitation. Volcker met with a number of high-ranking Mexican officials, but it is not known to what purpose. A few days later, de la Madrid dismissed Silva Herzog, publicly describing him as “disloyal.” De la Madrid named as his successor Gustavo Petriścioli, “not a man with a strong political base of his own” (NYT, June 18, 1986).

Alan Riding was in Mexico at the time, and it was he who filled in the details surrounding Silva Herzog’s dismissal, noting that the minister had acted “without even consulting the President,” becoming “a defender of the IMF without considering the internal repercussions.” Ironically, Silva Herzog’s chief critic in Mexico was Minister of Budget and Planning Carlos Salinas de Gortari; later, as president, Salinas would become a loyal implementer of the adjustment policies dictated by the IMF and the World Bank (NYT, June 18, 1986).

Following Silva Herzog’s dismissal, Salinas took control of the debt negotiations and sent Pedro Aspe to join the negotiating team in Washington (NYT, July 14, 1986). A broad accord was reached within weeks. Although its details have never been made public, this accord clearly entailed a readjustment of Mexico’s economic policy. The level of pressure that the United States exerted on Mexico during these ne-

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1For the accusations against Silva Herzog, see El Nacional, June 20, 1986. One particularly acute analysis of this transformation was Granados Chapa 1986.
gotiations was probably commensurate with the level of U.S. irritation with that country. In June 1986, the Mexican economy was a shambles and democracy was stalled. The United States’ disappointment was voiced frequently in the media; for example, Times correspondent Richard Meislin, who covered the elections of summer 1985, wrote, “the problem for Mexico is that these elections were supposed to be different. Foreign reporters seemed to take at face value President Miguel De la Madrid’s pledges that the elections would be conducted cleanly and that the ‘moral renewal’ would extend to the democratic process” (NYT, July 16, 1985). At that time, the media also detected a link between the economic and political arenas: some bankers, it was reported, believed that the crisis was largely a result of the government’s practice of “stimulating the economy in preparation for important state elections” (NYT, Sept. 21, 1985).

This was the backdrop for the fraudulent elections held in Chihuahua on June 6, 1986. In his coverage for the Times, William Stockton noted that “state electoral laws stack the deck against the opposition and clearly invite fraudulent voting and counting” (NYT, July 10, 1986). The Times published an important editorial that explored the deterioration of Mexico’s image in the United States. The editorial recalled that when Jesse Helms and other critics of Mexico had attacked the PRI for its lack of “legitimacy,” the Times had advised “the critics to stop bashing Mexico and show some sympathy for its problems. Well, look who’s bashing now. State elections in Mexico last Sunday were rife with fraud. And the accusers, accused and victims are all Mexicans” (NYT 1986d).

One particularly insightful editorial, published on June 11, 1986, contained both an affirmation and a question: “Negotiations imply a deal. Money for something. What should the Reagan Administration be asking for?” (NYT 1986e). For the Times, the answer was clear: Washington had to take advantage of the Mexican situation to press for a reduction in the “state’s role in the economy and the privileges of the PRI-favored few. Mexico’s leaders may find it hard to ditch their props of power. But let them stare at the alternatives and feel some friendly pressure from next door” (NYT, June 11, 1986). That such sentiments were expressed in the Times was remarkable. Never before had the paper so explicitly urged the U.S. government to use “friendly pressure”—that is, coercion—on Mexico.

Negotiations ultimately produced a new accord with the IMF, signed on July 22, 1986, under which Mexico pledged to carry out a “series of economic reforms in return for $1.6 billion in emergency assistance,” to be provided over the following eighteen months (NYT, July 23, 1986). Mexico would also have access to a further $6 billion from commercial banks and $4.4 billion from other official U.S. sources (NYT, July 25, 1986). “The key to this agreement is that the
Mexicans have agreed to make certain structural changes in their economy in order to reach these targets” (NYT, Oct. 1, 1986). The exact details of these “structural changes” were never made public, but Mexico was accepted into the GATT that same month.

This highly important period was capped, perhaps unwittingly, by a group of influential U.S. Mexicanists, some of whom were well known for their liberal views. Under the auspices of the Stanley Foundation, they prepared a document that made several unusually harsh observations regarding the Mexican regime, such as the following: “President De la Madrid, who has proved totally incapable of translating national interest into concrete programs, has protected his country’s institutions by appealing to nationalist sentiments, much like the Presidents who preceded him.” Mexico can no longer, it added, “continue to hide behind a pseudo-patriotic nationalism, waiting for the United States to solve its internal problems” (Stanley Foundation 1986: 8).

Two months later, in December 1986, the Times reported that over the coming year Mexico would carry out “further sales of state tourist, banking, and industrial enterprises,” reduce “trade subsidies,” and promote “more open investment policies and other market-oriented measures.” This was not wishful thinking. It accurately reflected the commitments undertaken by Mexico in exchange for the “new loan programs accorded with the IMF” (NYT, Feb. 12, 1986).

Interestingly, despite their groundbreaking importance, these accords received relatively little attention. Drug-related issues continued to dominate public awareness in the United States that summer, overshadowing this extremely important item (Bailey 1989: 66, 74). Another factor contributing to the relative inattention given to the accords was the involvement of new actors. In earlier periods, coercion as a foreign policy tool had been wielded by U.S. officials through the CIA, the armed forces, the United States Information Agency, and so on. In this instance, it was banks and multilateral organizations who filled this role. While they acted in an apparently impersonal and objective fashion, they clearly answered to the industrial powers. It was a different mechanism of domination, less direct and more diffuse, and it was to become an essential aspect of domination in the age of globalization.

The Mexican government, which could engineer the information it released domestically, trumpeted the accords as a triumph. Given the nation’s dire economic situation, perhaps they were. Nonetheless, the accords represented the final nail in the coffin of the economic model created by the Mexican Revolution and its substitution by another model more in line with the needs and interests of the United States. This, in turn, generated important changes in Mexico’s foreign policy, which would also be increasingly attuned to U.S. interests.
Many aspects of the IMF accords remain hidden in an official twilight of confidential documents. Although the Mexican economy's subsequent progress reveals that the pressure from Washington yielded many of the results that the United States had hoped for, there are no documents or testimony to fill in the details of this process. Only by learning which institutions and individuals in the United States applied the greatest pressure, and which Mexican actors reacted and how, can we hope to gain a full understanding of the combined forces of hegemony and coercion that were to have such a decisive impact on Mexican history.

The United States, as usual, did everything in its power to let the Mexican government off the hook, at least on the domestic level, allowing it to maintain its traditional image of independent nationalism—largely because Washington had decided to maintain its support for the incumbent authoritarian regime. This reveals some curious paradoxes: the nation that has historically been the greatest threat to Mexican sovereignty in effect acted as the staunchest supporter of Mexico's official nationalism. And a superpower that claims to promote democracy around the world has in fact been the truest friend of the longest-lived authoritarian political system. There can be little doubt as to the fruitfulness of the accord reached between Morrow and Calles in 1927.