The Reign of Neoliberalism

The year 1986 signaled the end of an era for the bilateral relationship, and it might have made a natural endpoint for this book. However, a chapter covering the years from 1986 to 1997—the “reign of neoliberalism”—was called for in light of this period’s extraordinary relevance for Mexico’s history and for the country’s relationship with the United States.

In 1989, three prominent Mexicanists compiled an anthology that opened with a query: “Where is the Mexican political system heading? By 1988, Mexico had clearly begun to experience a major political transition; but a transition to what?” (Cornelius, Gentleman, and Smith 1989: 1). Although answers were slow to appear, Mexico’s new shape came into sharp focus on July 6, 1997, when the ruling PRI party suffered a critical electoral defeat, the consequence of several key variables outlined in preceding chapters. The train of events from 1986 to 1997 can be explained in terms of (a) the gradual exhaustion of Mexican authoritarianism and its ability to control society, (b) the strengthening of already existing and/or the appearance of new social forces, and (c) the increasing impact and importance of external factors, a variable that has been largely ignored. These trends, which are likely to endure, suggest that Mexico will continue to advance toward a more democratic system, whose most important features—such as its economic model and its relationship with the United States—will now be debated and decided differently.

DETERIORATION OF THE ECONOMY

In 1986, after months of wrangling, the Mexican government finally signed a letter of intent with the International Monetary Fund in which it agreed to modify its economic model. This was the beginning
of an era of neoliberal governments which, over the following decade, would privatize state-owned holdings, slash subsidies and deficits, raze protectionist barriers, and implement tight fiscal controls. This called for major structural adjustments, which generated a series of spectacular macroeconomic successes during the presidency of Carlos Salinas: inflation fell from 159 percent in 1987 to 12 percent in 1992; the public-sector deficit, which stood at 17 percent of GNP in 1987, had been erased by 1991. And after a decade of economic downturn, Mexico’s GNP showed an average annual growth rate of 3.9 percent in the first three years of the 1990s (Centeno 1994: 16).

Mexico’s new economic policies—which were very much in line with the views of the U.S. elite—were greeted with favor in the United States. However, by 1990, 18 percent of Mexico’s economically active population (EAP) was unemployed, and between 25 and 40 percent was underemployed. In 1991, the minimum wage had only two-thirds of its 1982 purchasing power; and in 1990, approximately 70 percent of Mexican families were unable to afford a minimum basket of basic foodstuffs. Nutrition levels suffered, especially among children in rural areas (where about half were believed to be undernourished), and supposedly eradicated diseases reappeared (Centeno 1994: 19). The extreme costs of the new economic policy, which fell heavily on the impoverished majorities, were viewed as necessary and inevitable.

This indifference toward the repercussions of economic policy also reflects the Left’s inability to put forward an alternative and viable worldview or to translate discontent into effective protest. The technocrats remained in control of a population resigned to an absence of political options and compelled to make do with government promises of a brighter future. When Ernesto Zedillo won the presidency in August 1994, the U.S. elite interpreted his victory as the people’s ratification of their country’s economic orientation. However, the peso’s devaluation in December 1994 thrust Mexico into an economic and financial debacle that shattered popular optimism and accentuated a shift in U.S. perceptions. The election results of July 1997 will force new discussions of some aspects of the country’s economic policy.

**DETERIORATION OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL MECHANISMS**

Although the technocrats were not particularly interested in liberalizing the political system, they were unable to prevent a progressive deterioration in their capacity to control an increasingly organized society. The proliferation of obstacles inhibiting the use of coercion

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1Washington viewed this process with a degree of satisfaction, given that it preferred a peaceful and gradual transition.
was both cause and effect of this deterioration. As the armed forces became more professional, they also became less willing to repress peaceful demonstrations or opposition movements (Benítez 1994). Police units, meanwhile, were under intense scrutiny by human rights organizations and a growing body of independent media, both domestic and international. Further, the illegal drugs trade diminished the cohesion and the role of the police and the "rural guards," paramilitary forces which at one time numbered over 120,000 peasants under the command of army officers; they are no longer considered faithful allies of the regime.

As noted earlier, when the use of force is curtailed, populations lose their fear—an essential ingredient for any authoritarian regime—and they begin to play an increasingly active role in public affairs and in confrontations with the government. Paradoxically, political repression in Mexico was replaced by an equally worrying wave of criminal violence unleashed by the economic crisis and the corrupting power of drugs, and new fears simply replaced the old.

The fact that there are impediments to the use of coercion does not mean that the regime has completely lost its power to coerce. Mexico's security apparatus as a whole is now better trained and better armed than before, and the number of political assassinations remains high in many areas. Violence—either political or drug-related—introduces disturbing variables for the immediate future. The preservation of authoritarianism is a scenario that cannot be discounted, especially in certain regions.

DIVISIONS WITHIN THE RULING CLASS

In the mid-1980s the legendary discipline and unity of the PRI began to disintegrate, partly as a result of changes in the elite's profile and partly as a result of ideological differences and disputes over power. By 1986 the technocrats were clearly in control of the bureaucracy. However, the economic reforms they implemented aroused a great deal of contention within the governing group, and in September 1986 the press reported that a "Democratic Current" had arisen within the PRI that aimed to democratize the party's selection of its presidential candidates. Then-president de la Madrid, in no mood for democratically minded experiments, had the current's leaders summarily expelled from the PRI in 1987. They coalesced in the National Democratic Front (FDN) and supported Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's unsuccessful bid for the presidency in the turbulent elections of 1988,

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2Some sectors in the United States responded by stepping up their support for the regime.
from which Carlos Salinas emerged the victor (but only after resorting
to a range of illegal and immoral tactics).

Salinas was—and is—a master politician. Lacking both ethics and
a democratic vocation, he did have a project for Mexico and a cohe-
sive and sophisticated support group. His election, combined with the
system's accelerating disintegration and the cleavages between
groups with diverging styles and projects, gave rise to powerful ten-
sions within the ruling elite, which would erupt into overt violence in
1994 with a series of politically motivated murders. Recent electoral
defeats of PRI candidates have exacerbated disarray within this party
that was once considered the paradigm of monolithic power.

STRENGTHENING NEW POLITICAL AND SOCIAL FORCES

After the mid-1980s, the relaxation of authoritarian controls, in com-
bination with Mexico's economic reorientation and increasing open-
ness, allowed a surprisingly wide range of independent political and
social forces to appear and/or coalesce. This process has generated
important benefits for Mexico's opposition parties. Although the most
remarkable such case up until 1997 was the PAN, the Party of the
Democratic Revolution's (PRD) impressive showing in the 1997 elec-
tions effectively transformed Mexico into a multiparty political sys-
tem. The growth of the PRD (which had endured ferocious harass-
ment throughout the Salinas administration) indicates the presence of
a broad social base that is only now beginning to find outlets other
than the PRI for a center-left party in Mexico.

The media play a strategically important role in political processes.
They can be the bastions of democracy, or they can be the instruments
by which authoritarian governments control what information
reaches the population. The Mexican government—which has never
underestimated the importance of this privileged mechanism of
domination—has traditionally made every effort to control it, usually
with success.3 This began to change during the 1990s. Although the
large private television networks are latecomers to this transition,
relatively speaking, the press and several radio stations and/or pro-
grams have gained substantial independence.

Over recent years, nongovernmental organizations have estab-
lished themselves as important new players on the national scene.
Their influence has increased exponentially through national or inter-
national "networks" able to galvanize joint action.4 The NGOs are a
further expression of a "social capital" that has been accumulating for
decades, and which is at the very heart of democratic culture (Fox

3For good analyses of the regime's favorite methods, see Camp 1985; Hellman 1983.
4An analysis of these organizations appears in Aguayo and Parra 1996.
Groups such as Alianza Cívica have played a key role in the construction of a more democratic political culture—which is the central incentive in citizen mobilizations for free and transparent elections. Social movements have appeared simultaneously on every level of society. The Urban Popular Movement (MUP) remains active; the number of unions breaking free of corporate control is on the rise; and aggressive peasants’ and debtors’ organizations like El Barzón have appeared.

In the opening years of the decade, most observers of Mexico were convinced that the country had definitively crushed all guerrilla movements in the 1960s and 1970s. They were wrong; an armed struggle was gestating in southern Mexico. In January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) erupted on the scene in the mountainous regions of Chiapas, signaling the beginning of a dramatic reversal in the fortunes of the Salinas administration. This peasant rebellion was still unresolved in June 1995, when the Peoples’ Revolutionary Army (EPR) appeared in Guerrero, Oaxaca, and other states, adding a further degree of complexity regarding Mexico’s future.

Any list of new actors appearing in Mexico during the 1990s must include the increasingly powerful groups associated with the production, trafficking, and distribution of illegal narcotics. As Peter Andreas has pointed out, economic liberalization, together with the United States’ successful effort to close off Caribbean drug routes, has strengthened Mexico’s position in the international drugs market. The result has been to “narcotize the state and economy in Mexico” (Andreas 1996: 23). Beginning in 1987, each Mexican successive president has asserted that drug cartels pose a grave threat to Mexico’s national security, although each has proved unable to halt their spread (Aguayo 1990; Chabat 1994).

And no effort at a comprehensive analysis can ignore the impact of the international community, and especially the United States, whose influence continues to grow while also becoming increasingly differentiated.

The External Factor

The importance of external actors is intimately linked to Mexico’s opening to the world, and this, in turn, has gone hand in hand with economic, political, and social globalization. From 1986 to 1997, society and government in Mexico developed their respective international agendas, establishing ties with groups around the world and creating processes of extraordinary complexity. The ideas and politics of external actors now influencing events in Mexico can be roughly
divided into those who support the PRI and those who support opposition or democratic groups (this second category will be examined later).

The influence of the U.S. government and intellectual and political elite upon Mexico grew during these years, confirming the notion that the understanding between the elites of these two nations had reached a point of perfect and unprecedented harmony. Although certain traditionally nationalist and leftist sectors within the Mexican leadership resisted this new intimacy, they had no clear alternative project or antidote with which to confront the peculiarities of relationships of domination in a neoliberal age. The new and diffuse form of government interventionism—in which economic policies were imposed by international financial organisms, albeit organisms controlled by Washington—placed traditional schools of nationalism, such as the Mexican one, in a serious dilemma.

Another element was the United States’ increasing preference for hegemonic forms of domination, under which the Mexican leadership would voluntarily adopt American policies and priorities. To encourage such a result, the United States has traditionally sought out allies who hold compatible viewpoints. An earlier chapter documented the case of Ambassador Antonio Carrillo Flores in the 1960s. His 1990s counterpart was a Harvard-educated economist, a leader adept in the secret codes of the Mexican political system, who was able to navigate this country’s corridors of power with ease. This is, of course, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who was to benefit enormously from the U.S. elite’s absolute and unconditional support.

THE 1988 ELECTIONS

During the 1988 campaign, leading newspapers, the U.S. government, and many scholars threw their combined weight behind candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari. This support, which was to endure throughout Salinas’s administration, reflects the limitations and biases of U.S. consciousness. The elections, marred by inequities and fraud, failed to meet even the minimum international standards for believability. Nonetheless, the United States did everything in its power to legitimate them, using tactics fine-tuned over decades. For example, government spokespersons frequently pointed out that, despite some problems, Mexico was advancing toward democracy, thanks to Carlos Salinas, who was explicitly disassociated from a series of negative signals such as severe criticism of the opposition and a whitewash in official documents.

Three days after the election, and with no prior announcement from electoral authorities, Salinas declared himself the victor in the
presidential race, also noting that the opposition had made important advances and that "the days of the one-party system are finished" (Washington Post, July 8, 1988). Times correspondent Larry Rothen praised Salinas's "remarkable speech" (Nyt, July 10, 1988). Simply by acknowledging that the PRI had suffered some defeats, Salinas validated his democratic and reformist credentials. It is worth recalling that a view of Salinas as reformer was already established before the elections; a Times editorial appearing just prior to the election proposed that "Mr. Salinas represents the most radical break with the past" and urged the PRI to "heed his pleas to respect the integrity of the electoral process" (Nyt 1988a).

The Times was not alone in its belief that Salinas would bring a wave of democratic change to Mexico. On July 18, 1988, William Brannigin, correspondent for the Washington Post, noted that "Carlos Salinas de Gortari already appears to be succeeding in his stated aim of fundamentally changing the country's outmoded political system." Salinas had proved his commitment to a "Mexican-style glasnost [by] admitting unprecedented losses in state-level presidential voting and congressional races" (Washington Post, July 12, 1988). In an editorial published on July 15, the Wall Street Journal offered a daring assertion: "many of the maneuvers around the vote-counting look like attempts to undermine Mr. Salinas, who pushed for clean elections" (Wall Street Journal 1988).

To justify their early assessment, the media resorted to the old argument that there was "an internal struggle within the PRI." The Washington Post stated that this was a struggle between "Salinas supporters who want to recognize party losses [and the] old guard stalwarts who do not" (July 8, 1988), a view that continued to serve Salinas well. A Times editorial that explicitly disassociated Salinas from "the most retrograde elements in his own party" also praised him as a "convinced and capable free-market exponent" (Nyt 1988b).

Even experienced correspondents like Alan Riding joined in the legitimating chorus: "Salinas, a 40-year-old Harvard-trained economist, has repeatedly pledged to ‘perfect’ Mexico’s democracy.” Riding portrayed Salinas as a direct opposite of the “old-time political bosses in the governing party who believe that no concessions should be made to the opposition” (Nyt, July 8, 1988). The U.S. elite believed in Salinas—as they had in Echeverría and López Portillo—because they wanted to. Throughout his career and even during his presidential campaign, Salinas had never displayed even a hint of pro-democratic yearnings. However, he did display intelligence and an unquenchable thirst for power, which lay at the heart of his uncanny ability to navigate Mexico’s labyrinthine corridors of power. Moreover, he had an economic project for Mexico that coincided with theo-
retical paradigms then in vogue in Washington and around the world.

It was this vitally important coincidence that explains an unprecedented editorial that appeared in the *Washington Post* on July 18, 1988. Never before had such statements been published in this newspaper known for its liberal principles. The article justified electoral fraud in Mexico, arguing that the country was "in the midst of an extraordinary series of reforms led from within the dominant party. Ballot fraud always deserves attention, but it's the reform that is the great and historic change."

John Bailey, who has studied coverage of Mexican affairs in the U.S. media, also recorded efforts to minimize the fraud: "when the results were announced, reporters conveyed the opposition's protests less emphatically than in 1985. The press concentrated nearly as much on the struggle within the PRI as on the significance of the elections, and editorial comments were generally more positive about the elections, noting that Mexico had begun the transition to genuine democracy" (1989: 85). The notion of a country that has not achieved, but is advancing toward, a brilliant future is one of the oldest and most persistent of U.S. perceptions. It has surfaced many times since 1946, and especially during irregular or contested elections.

At the same time, there were ongoing efforts to shoot down the opposition, especially the Left. The *Wall Street Journal* presented Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, "the founder of the modern PRI and the inventor of much of its vote-stealing machinery." The *Wall Street Journal* added that the party proposing Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as its presidential candidate was no more than "the Echeverría wing of the PRI" and that much of its electoral muscle came from "'La Quina', Joaquín Hernández Galicia, head of the PEMEX union, long a PRI stalwart but in constant combat with the De la Madrid government in its efforts to control corruption" (Wall Street Journal 1988).

Although most of the U.S. media backed Salinas, they also urged his government to acknowledge opposition victories. A *Times* editorial advised Salinas to "honor his pledge to recognize what he calls Mexico's 'new political reality' [and allow both the Left and the Right to] translate their gains into institutional political forms" (NYT 1988c). The media also reported on the manipulation of information in Mexico, criticizing the government-leaning news program anchored by

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5 Although the elder Cárdenas's authoritarianism is unquestioned, we must also remember that it was in the 1929 elections that the Revolutionary National Party (PNR), the PRI's direct predecessor, tested techniques for stealing elections in the first great electoral fraud of the postrevolutionary era, with the willing cooperation of U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow.
Jacobo Zabludovsky and praising the objectivity and professionalism of Monterrey’s *El Norte* (NYT, July 16, 1988).

As had been the case since the days of Miguel Alemán, the media’s support for Salinas consisted of both what was said and what was not said. No major U.S. newspaper ever considered publishing a serious piece on the fraud perpetrated in Mexico’s 1988 presidential election or its impact on the outcome. Information on electoral irregularities was easily available: in thirty-five rural districts, Salinas’s vote total fell between 105 and 125 percent of the total adult population as reported in the 1980 census.\(^1\)

The U.S. government made every effort to shore up Salinas’s controversial victory. One of the *Times*’s most prestigious journalists, R.W. Apple, Jr., suggested that “although they will not say so for publication, American officials are pulling for Mr. Salinas in what they consider an honest attempt to make a new start. They appear unconcerned about voting irregularities.” Apple also noted that these same officials were “giving considerable weight to reports from Mexico City suggesting that Mr. Salinas has allied himself with a reform group within the PRI” (NYT, July 11, 1988).

Washington’s actions were more eloquent than any declaration. On October 17, 1988, Washington agreed to loan Mexico $3.5 billion which, according to the *Times*, was intended to “underwrite existing policies at a time of great political ferment.” In this same article, author Larry Rother quoted an anonymous U.S. banker in a prophetic assertion: “Don’t think for a minute that this is the last chapter. Mexico will be back at the well again, and the United States will once again have to help, if for no other reason than that it cannot afford to turn its back” (NYT, Oct. 20, 1988).

As of 1976, the U.S. State Department began producing annual congressional reports on the human rights situation in Mexico and around the world. These reports are useful—and often ignored—barometers of the bilateral relationship. Despite the cautious language of the reports, it is clear that both Democratic and Republican administrations overtly supported the PRI, using techniques such as those described in preceding chapters. For example, although the reports sometimes included references to human rights abuses, these were generally followed by praise for the government’s efforts to eradicate them.

The congressional report from 1980, for example, described instances of torture, but it followed up by noting that “the government has prosecuted some police officers who obtained evidence or confessions through torture.” The 1991 report asserted that the Mexican

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\(^1\)In Ocosingo, Chiapas, Salinas’s vote was 105 percent of the total electoral roll, and in Comitán it was 124 percent. Chiapas, with 3 percent of the total national population, contributed 6 percent of Salinas’s votes nationwide (López 1988: 31–33; Fox 1996).
government had not ceased in its "efforts begun in 1990 to reduce the incidence of torture and similar abuse by officials" (DOS 1981: 479–80, 1992: 667). Other assumptions made in these reports were that the existence of a legal framework necessarily meant that the framework was being adhered to, and that official statements could be accepted at face value without independent confirmation.

The kinds of guidelines followed in the reports colored most perceptions of the Mexican electoral process. They can be best appreciated by comparing coverage of the 1986 and 1988 elections. The State Department's report for 1986 states that the July elections in Chihuahua were plagued by irregularities, and it scrupulously noted that charges of electoral fraud were "levied by both Mexican and foreign investigative journalists as well as by opposition party activists." It added that "following the Chihuahua State elections, prominent leftist intellectuals in Mexico as well as members of the Catholic Church hierarchy publicly denounced what they believed to be blatant electoral frauds in those elections" (DOS 1987: 565, emphasis added). This text unequivocally reveals that there was a full awareness of the extent of Mexico's electoral irregularities; the inclusion of foreign journalists and members of the Catholic hierarchy in the list of critics was an indirect manner of validating these charges.

The report for 1988 differed considerably. Despite the importance of the 1988 elections, the State Department report for that year merely noted that "opposition parties and other observers have charged the PRI with electoral fraud." The report offered an absurdly baroque justification: "given the PRI's greatly reduced margin of victory compared to previous years, many observers believe that the extent of electoral fraud in 1988 was considerably reduced." This was followed by a list of the government's glowing advances for 1988: an increased number of opposition seats in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, and the entry of a woman (a state governor) into the administration's upper echelons (DOS 1989: 631, 637). Such distortions allowed the United States to persevere in its defense of an authoritarian regime without violating its own self-view as an exceptional and objective nation.

SALINAS DE GORTARI AND NAFTA

Although the Times coverage of the Salinas administration has not been subjected to content analysis, the overriding impression left by important articles published during this period is that Salinas was the international community's favorite Mexican president, even surpassing Miguel Alemán in popularity. A statement appearing in the Economist—extreme even at the time of its publication in 1993—
reflects this: “despite his controversial entrance [the 1988 elections], four years into his administration, Mr. Salinas has earned the right to be acclaimed as one of the great men of the 20th Century” (Economist 1993).

Such enthusiasm has been explained in a number of ways. Some observers have emphasized Salinas’s propaganda and public relations apparatus, which was adept at creating images the United States was predisposed to accept. Its central message—that Mexico’s new technocrats were a modernizing elite without whom the country would inevitably slide into instability—played on some of the United States’ most deep-seated anxieties while portraying Salinas not just as the best but as the only viable option.

Of course, not everything was propaganda. Salinas carried out a fundamental reorientation of the Mexican national project, and many of the changes he wrought were necessary. He was able to reduce the state’s role in the economy, regularize the Church’s legal status, and establish a less tortured relationship with the United States. One of his most important reforms was the decision to negotiate a free trade agreement that would consolidate the trends outlined above. The process through which Mexico arrived at this hugely important decision reflects the extensive powers vested in the presidency. In a conversation with Robert Pastor, Salinas explained that one of his reasons for seeking a North American trade agreement was that “changes in Europe and East Asia and an apparent reliance on blocs convinced me that we should also be part of an economic trading bloc with the United States and Canada” (Pastor 1990: 32, emphasis added).

The traditional political class obediently implemented a presidential order that entailed a historic turnabout in Mexico’s perceptions of, and manner of establishing relations with, the United States. All opposition was easily brushed aside by Salinas’s public relations mechanisms, which cemented the belief that this was the road to a more prosperous society.

Debate on NAFTA in the United States revolved around its potential benefits for the U.S. economy and for Mexico’s general well-being. Grinspun and Cameron’s analysis of the literature on Mexico’s economic links with the rest of the world reveals that most analysts in the United States believed not only that NAFTA was inevitable, but also that it was in Mexico’s best interests. NAFTA, it was frequently argued, would result in “stable growth of the Mexican economy and sustained capital inflows to fund that growth; slow but sure improvement in the standard of living of poor Mexicans as wages and

7Unfortunately, many changes were implemented in such a hurried and disorderly manner that catastrophic errors were unavoidable. For example, corruption soared to unprecedented levels, although—as happened during the oil boom—this was downplayed by the U.S. media.
working conditions improve; improvement in social indicators as the benefits of growth ‘trickled down’; and lagged, but steady liberalization of the political system” (Grinspun and Cameron 1996). That is, economic liberalization would eventually lead to greater democracy. This dovetailed neatly with a chronology developed by Salinas: “when you are carrying out a strong economic reform, you must make sure that you build the political consensus around it. If you are at the same time introducing additional drastic political reform, you may end up with no reform at all. And we want to have reform, not a disintegrated country” (New Perspectives Quarterly 1991: 8). Although important advances have been made toward liberalizing the political system, these have had to overcome continued resistance from the ruling elite.

The United States was so enthralled with Salinas’s reform program that it glossed over the most negative aspects of his administration. One serious consequence was that the drug cartels were able to acquire a great deal of power without calling attention to themselves. In December 1995, the Economist acknowledged that “during Mr. Salinas’ tenure, drug bosses consolidated their fiefs. . . . American anti-drug agents knew of the spreading rot, often refusing to work with counterparts they knew to be crooked. But other American officials, keen to cement Mr. Salinas’ economic reforms with the NAFTA, turned a blind eye, often issuing statements praising his anti-drug efforts, despite evidence to the contrary” (Andreas 1996: 24).

The U.S. elite’s commitment to Salinas and NAFTA must be evaluated in terms of the story so far. Washington’s rationale appears in an April 1991 confidential memorandum from U.S. Ambassador to Mexico John Negroponte, which states that reforms in Mexico’s foreign policy and economy began in the mid-1980s, a process that was “dramatically accelerated by Salinas after he came to office in 1988. The proposal for an FTA is in a way the capstone of these new policy approaches.” In foreign policy terms, an “FTA would institutionalize acceptance of a North American orientation to Mexico’s foreign relations,” and in economic terms, the FTA would be an “instrument to promote, consolidate and guarantee continued policies of economic reform beyond the Salinas administration” (DOS 1991: 1).8

From a broader perspective, although the understanding between the two countries had functioned for almost a century, there were still unsatisfactory aspects from Washington’s point of view. Salinas presented the United States with an opportunity to quell the occasional irritations that resulted when this potentially unstable neighbor held an independent attitude. Through Salinas, Mexico would finally adopt the United States’ model for political and economic organiza-

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8Orme (1993: 17) reached similar conclusions.
tion. NAFTA would also help assuage any residual guilt left from a long history of U.S. aggression. As a U.S. government official stated in private conversation, Salinas was like a priest who could absolve the United States from all historical sins (author interview, March 1996).

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF POLITICS

The interests of the new actors involved in the bilateral relationship became increasingly apparent as part of a broader phenomenon after the mid-1980s. A number of historical trajectories merged in an internationalization of Mexican politics that had two distinct expressions. A growing number of Mexican actors incorporated the external factor into their tactical and strategic thinking, and foreign groups became more interested in Mexican affairs. In the case of the United States, the dialogue between the two societies intensified and the myth of official Mexican independence and nationalism was gradually laid to rest.

During the Central American conflicts, Mexico’s geographical situation made it a natural point of confluence for international organizations with an interest in the region. Foundations and organizations concerned with the safety of refugees and displaced populations established close ties with independent Mexican organizations such as the San Cristóbal and Tapachula dioceses and NGOs from around the country. Such ties raised awareness and extended the vision of Mexican NGOs—traditionally semi-clandestine, inward-facing, and insular groups, very much in the shadow of an authoritarian government—regarding the importance of international networks. This, in turn, laid the foundation for a relationship that would facilitate the flow of support and financial resources at critical moments, such as electoral observation in 1994 and the peace process in Chiapas. Today, complex networks of Mexican, U.S., and Canadian organizations have become an important influence on inter-governmental relations in North America.

Simultaneously, the long-standing taboo against Mexicans discussing Mexican problems in foreign arenas gave way, and the United States became a forum for a number of highly critical Mexican commentators (see Castañeda 1986). In August 1986, members of the PAN leveled serious charges of electoral fraud and corruption against the Mexican government in an informal hearing convened by Senator Jesse Helms (NYT, Aug. 15, 1986), prompting an outcry in Mexico.

*Castañeda began to criticize the Mexican government as early as summer 1985.
and accusations that the PAN members were inviting a U.S. intervention.\footnote{Paradoxically, that same month the Mexican government quietly embarked on a deliberate attempt to influence the United States. In August 1986, the Mexican government hired a number of U.S. lobbyists to promote its official image in Washington. For some unknown reason these enthusiastic lobbyists dumped fourteen informational dossiers on Mexico—each weighing over five kilos—at the Times's doorstep (NYT, Aug. 29, 1986).}

After 1986, the flame of official patriotism dimmed rapidly, and its occasional flare-ups were not particularly bright or effective. Salinas's economic policies, along with the increasing closeness between the two governments, laid bare the incongruence of the official pose of independence and facilitated greater dialogue between the two societies. Slowly, fueled by the pioneering labors of many scholars, a wide range of groups in the United States began to take a greater interest in Mexico. In 1986, the Times published a letter from the United States section of Amnesty International expressing concern for "over 400 instances of disappearances, torture, ill-treatment and the detention of those we consider to be prisoners of conscience," adding that Mexico was "second only to Chile" in the list of hemispheric human rights violators (Acker and King 1986).

In 1988, the Minnesota International Human Rights Committee\footnote{Today the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights.} established the first program dedicated exclusively to Mexico. In 1989, Americas Watch began an investigation on Mexico with the goal (as described by executive director Juan Méndez) of "responding to a growing interest from non-official sectors—churches, unions, and social organizations—in what is going on in Mexico" (author interview, July 1990). The U.S. section of Amnesty International was simultaneously conducting further investigations thanks to increasing financial and human resources freed up by the democratization of Latin America (author interview with Beth Kempler, July 1990).\footnote{This report did not appear until 1991. See Amnesty International1991.} These organizations soon discovered Mexican NGOs able to provide them with accurate information (and not intimidated by fears of being labeled unpatriotic).

The Mexican government was an involuntary contributor to this internationalization. Coincidentally, an Americas Watch report (Human Rights in Mexico: A Policy of Impunity) was presented in Los Angeles in June 1990, only days before the presidents of Mexico and the United States announced their decision to begin negotiations for a free trade agreement in North America. Realizing that human rights issues could pose obstacles to a trade accord, Salinas immediately ordered the creation of the National Commission on Human Rights.
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(CNDH), and his team oversaw its formal establishment a mere seventy-two hours later.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite its hasty origins and the fact that it was set up with no jurisdiction over labor or electoral matters, by concentrating on the defense of basic individual rights the CNDH constructed new barriers to the use of coercion, and this, in turn, allowed independent social movements to appear and evolve. Another unexpected consequence was that the CNDH fueled the internationalization of Mexican politics. In order to bolster the image of the regime, CNDH officials embarked on a campaign of intense international activity, which ultimately legitimated the concept of international activism as a whole, including that being carried out by independent organizations.\textsuperscript{14}

Mexico’s human rights NGOs benefited from yet another positive consequence of the CNDH’s creation. For many years such groups had focused on defending individual rights. With the creation of the CNDH, the NGOs were able to expand their agendas to include broader rights and freedoms. After 1991, political rights, civil rights, and freedom of information would become pivotal issues for the vigorous civic movement that would reach a high point in 1997. Such are the paradoxes of history: an authoritarian action nourished the very forces that would eventually rise up against authoritarian forms of government.

1994–1997

In December 1993, Mexico’s ruling elite seemed likely to remain in power, postponing hopes for political liberalization. Then on January 1, 1994, the EZLN burst onto the national scene; in August came the all-important presidential election; and in December 1994 Mexico devalued the peso. These events and others can all be interpreted—though in differing ways—in light of the variables described above.

Salinas’s triumphant dream showed its first signs of turning into a nightmare on January 1, 1994, when an Indian uprising in Chiapas laid bare the limitations and defects of the economic model, exposed the weaknesses of the political classes, and accelerated processes of democratization. The government’s initial inclination was to respond with force. When this elicited a strong negative reaction from large sectors of Mexican society and the international community, the government entered into negotiations with the rebels, and a truce, albeit an uneasy one, was eventually established in Chiapas.

\textsuperscript{13}General Directorates for Human Rights were established in the early days of the Salinas administration, both in the Ministry of Government and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

\textsuperscript{14}For an analysis of Mexico’s new style of foreign policy, see Eisenstadt 1992.
Just as the situation seemed to be coming under control, PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated in March 1994. His death was followed by a second major political assassination, that of PRI president José Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September 1994. Meanwhile, Manuel Camacho Solís, passed over in the PRI's choice of its candidate for the presidency, began to distance himself from the official party.

This mood of political violence, together with the situation in Chiapas, heightened the importance of the August 1994 presidential election, in which two strong opposition candidates were challenging the man deputied to candidacy after Colosio's death—Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León. The elections were carefully monitored by organizations such as Alianza Cívica, a coalition of hundreds of NGOs and thousands of Mexican citizens. Alianza Cívica not only provided a clear picture of a host of electoral irregularities, but it also exposed the poverty of Mexico's civic culture: it was clear that much of the electronic media were anything but impartial and that there were absolutely no effective limits on campaign expenditures.¹⁵

Reactions in the United States—and among the international community—dramatically reflected the extent to which opinion was divided. The U.S. government responded to the Chiapas situation by giving strong support to the Mexican authorities. And in August 1994, Washington clearly placed peaceful elections ahead of democratic elections, in an attitude reminiscent of U.S. support for the Mexican regime during the contested elections of 1929, 1940, 1946, 1952, and 1988.

Such government responses were in stark contrast to the newfound breadth of social reaction and the attitude of the U.S. media. Members of an American human rights organization, invited by their Mexican counterparts, arrived in Chiapas only four days after the rebels first appeared on the scene. Then in July, the presidential elections were closely monitored by a wide range of organizations; Global Exchange and the Washington Office on Latin America were but two of the many groups that contributed observers to back their Mexican counterparts. And foundations, such as the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, underwrote activities to promote democracy.

Some of the most dramatic expressions of these shifting perceptions came from Newsweek correspondent Tim Padgett, whose reflections on his Mexican experiences summarize a radical change in attitudes. He acknowledged that Salinas was in many ways an extraordinary Mexican president. However, he went on to sum up a very generalized feeling: "he fooled us into thinking he had modern-

¹⁵For the first time in history, in 1994 a number of organizations were able to provide a clear x-ray of Mexico's electoral processes. See Aguayo 1995; Alianza Cívica 1994a, 1994b.
ized Mexico.” Salinas changed “the image but not the substance of Mexico.” His “economic reforms failed to modernize Mexico because he failed to modernize the corrupt, repressive and inefficient apparatus that controls Mexico’s economy in the first place.” Salinas “charmed us into forgetting that most Mexican politics is a byzantine, mafioso affair. I would have been better off during his Presidency if I’d remembered the rule of thumb I was taught as a young reporter in Chicago: ‘If your mother says she loves you—check it out!’”—something far too few journalists or scholars bothered to do.

“Why was Salinas able to fool the United States?” Padgett wondered. The reason was that he was just like an American: “he wore Armani business suits and talked like a Wall Street broker . . . and while most Mexican Presidents take pride in a certain Latin lover’s mystique, gossip columnists complained that Salinas was a sexual bore. He was just like an American (or at least a Brit).” This public relations maestro . . . promised that the money we’d pour into Mexico as a result of his economic reforms would transform his country into a modern democracy with a healthy and happy middle class. Here’s the problem: in reality, Salinas was firmly allied with Mexico’s oligarchy, which meant he wasn’t interested in fostering either democracy or a middle class.

Padgett described some of Salinas’s preferred strategies:

One of his favorite gimmicks was to take the billions of dollars his government was earning from the auction of state-run companies and fly around the country giving roads, water or electricity to the poor, as if it were all a gift from him instead of their right as Mexican citizens. And he always took U.S. journalists along to show everyone he was a world player.

Tim Padgett—like many other observers, both Mexican and foreign—had a profound change of heart regarding Salinas’s Mexico following the Zapatista rebellion. After government troops slaughtered rebels at Ocósingo during the conflict’s early days, Padgett realized that “there was something very wrong beneath the surface of the ‘Mexican Miracle’” (T. Padgett 1996).

This premonition was confirmed by the December 1994 devaluation, which even economists favorable to the regime acknowledged was “caused, most of all, by the fiscal and monetary policies implemented throughout 1994” by the Salinas administration, policies that were “wholly inconsistent with the rate of exchange.” Another catalyst, for which the regime was also to blame, was the conversion of
“the entire short-term government debt [tesobonos] which had been originally set in pesos, into dollars, which exacerbated the risk of insolvency” (Lustig 1995). Once again, presidential authoritarianism and the absence of controls over Mexico’s presidents were to stand the country in poor stead.

The devaluation called for yet another financial bailout of the Mexican economy. As in 1976, 1982, 1985, 1986, and 1988, the Mexican government was again dependent on the goodwill of Washington and the international community. Their reaction was unprecedented. By authorizing an enormous relief package, the White House confirmed that the bilateral understanding remained very much in place. In late January 1995—in record time—the United States announced that it had put together a package of up to $U.S.50 billion, including $20 billion from the U.S. government, $17.8 billion from the International Monetary Fund, $10 billion from the Bank for International Settlements, $1 billion from Canada, and $1 billion from other Latin American countries.

The proposed financial bailout package evoked a furor in Washington. The Clinton administration was charged with having obscured, or even concealed, the truth about Mexico’s economic situation in 1994 (D’Amato 1995: 7-13), and these accusations were not without some basis. Later, when the time came for the State Department to certify Mexico’s fight against drugs, as it does annually, certain U.S. sectors expressed outright disgust. Senator Robert Bennet noted,

> the certification is clearly a joke, if the purpose is to determine what is going on in Mexico. At the same time, I understand why it was done. It was done because the President felt that we could not undercut President Zedillo to the point where the problem could get worse, so we lied. We can’t de-certify Mexico. We have to lie about what is going on because our relationship with Mexico is so important that we can’t let it go down the tubes (Andreas 1996: 26).

Other critics, such as Representative David Bonior, argued that the United States should not send “money to Mexico just to prop up a nation with the fastest growing number of billionaires in the world.” The Clinton administration defended its decision with arguments relating to the economy, national security, and prestige.16 Secretary of State Warren Christopher testified before the House Banking and Financial Services Committee on January 25, 1995, that the United

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16Curiously, a former U.S. administration once defended its involvement in Vietnam in very similar terms.
States had an immense economic and political stake in Mexico’s stability and, further, that the financial bailout would not only have “far-reaching implications for the prosperity and stability of Latin America and of emerging market economies around the world,” but that it would also serve as “a test of American leadership” (Roett 1996: 37–38). In order to divert criticism (and to protect its interests), the U.S. government attached an unprecedented series of strings to this loan, forcing the Mexican government to accelerate the process of economic restructuring even further.

As the decade progressed, it became apparent that the United States’ impact on Mexico was becoming increasingly multidimensional. Although Washington continues to support the incumbent regime, a wide range of groups promoting peace or democracy have consolidated their positions, creating new spaces for dialogue and facilitating social transformations. Although these forces are still a minority, their capacity to hinder the implementation of authoritarian government policies has been in evidence during the search for peace in Chiapas and the ongoing struggle for free and fair elections which, since the 1997 elections, has made remarkable progress.

To summarize, between 1986 and 1997 it was clear that the old bilateral understanding, though somewhat modified, continued in force. And it became clear that analyses of Mexico’s contemporary history could no longer ignore the role of the United States. There is ample evidence that external support for the PRI was instrumental in allowing the party to extend its stay in power and to set an agonizingly slow rate of transition. In this context, President Clinton’s decision to meet with the heads of Mexico’s opposition parties during his May 1997 visit to Mexico was a clear signal that Washington has accepted the inevitability of a more democratic Mexico. Although Clinton’s actions did not influence the electoral results, they did indicate an extremely important policy shift.

For Mexico, the dramatic results of the July 1997 elections provide a golden opportunity to debate and define the profile of a new political system. In this process—which is far from concluded—an important point for discussion will be the kind of relationship that Mexico must establish with the United States, a nation now challenged to achieve a better understanding of the problems and aspirations of the Mexican people.

CONCLUSION

Washington has staked everything on a slow transition in Mexico. The Mexican government is determined to remain in power. And a dizzyingly varied and growing range of forces is exerting unrelenting
pressure for change. It is extremely hard to predict what the outcome will be. The situation continues to be unstable. Schisms and divisions within the PRI continue to appear; during the party's 17th National Assembly, for example, the traditional political classes rebelled against the new technocrats, who found the road to the presidency suddenly blocked.

The year 1997 was one of struggle for the entrenched authoritarian regime. Despite being seriously weakened, it still refused to relinquish its grip on power and privilege, while the forces arrayed against it gained in strength. In this ongoing process Mexico appears to oscillate between reaching some kind of consensus and succumbing to the threat of ungovernability and the proliferation of regional pockets of violence.

Will Washington continue to constitute an obstacle to democracy in Mexico? Will groups in the United States attain the coherence they need to thwart their government's antidemocratic efforts? No clear answer can emerge until this major transformation is complete. But as the finishing touches are put to this book in late 1997, there is reason for optimism.