Myths and [mis] perceptions

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The United States and Mexican Nationalism

This volume has sketched in broad strokes the U.S. elite's perceptions of Mexico, and it has presented an extensive base of information for a reinterpretation of certain aspects of recent Mexican history. This exploration of the past fifty years of Mexico's evolution and its relationship with the United States demonstrates that many myths should be revised. These include the assumptions that Mexico is hard to understand, that the U.S. elite is exceptional, and that Mexicans are passive and unwilling to open up to foreigners (that is, that they are insular and nationalistic).

The material contained in the 6,903 articles on Mexico published in the New York Times was used in two ways. The first was to digest and utilize the vast amount of information contained in these articles. The second was to interpret trends in perception and the evolution of ideas. In both cases, the results were complemented with sources from academia and government.

Time and again, the evidence reveals that there is a prevailing worldview in the United States that has colored that country's perceptions of many aspects of life in Mexico. With some exceptions, this worldview is characterized by a perennial optimism toward Mexico's ruling party and governments and a total rejection of any current that leans even slightly toward the Left. The confluence in perceptions was not the product of a plot hatched by a CIA mastermind of ideologies; it was the result of the convergences of widely shared beliefs, such as belief in the exceptional character of the United States and in the inherently benign nature of capitalism and liberalism.

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}The importance of these exceptions has increased steadily since the 1980s.}\]
While most of the individuals quoted in this volume are likely convinced of the originality of their respective contributions, all were nevertheless "collective speakers," their words socially determined by ideas that evolved in tandem with the evolution of U.S. society—in the process modifying the parameters within which the United States viewed Mexico.

To argue that there was a collective consciousness is not to suggest that there was no room for individual contributions; it is simply to emphasize the importance of their overarching context. The works of Galdwin Hill, Oscar Lewis, Henry Giniger, Susan Kaufman Purcell, Kevin Middlebrook, Bruce Bagley, Roderic Camp, Roger Hansen, John Womack, Evelyn Stevens, Alan Riding, John Bailey, Friedrich Katz, David Brooks, Susan Eckstein, Wayne Cornelius, Judith Hellman, David Ronfeldt, Peter Smith, Jonathan Fox, John Coatsworth, Ellen Lutz, George Grayson, and many others, were all individual contributions to knowledge that helped expand and enrich the collective consciousness. Each of these authors absorbed and processed ideas and information that circulated in the United States, in Mexico, and around the world; and after being subjected to their individual imaginations and explored with the tools of scientific rigor, these ideas then bred new ideas in a dialectical process that is as interminable and ancient as history.

However, the incorporation of a fact or idea into an individual or collective consciousness is not dependent solely on its validity; the idea must also be compatible with the interests of the person who develops it, or of the community or country that is its context. When there is no such compatibility, mechanisms of evasion, denial, or rationalization come into play.

PERCEPTIONS OF MEXICO

How accurate is the U.S. elite's perception of Mexico? Although this question may seem inevitable, it is also fundamentally misconceived. The United States has all the information it needs to attain a full understanding of Mexico. The question, better put, would be how much the United States really wishes, or is able, to know about Mexico. And here enter the individual and collective limits of consciousness, as well as the mechanisms that are frequently employed to disguise them. Neither are exclusive to the United States; on the contrary, they are a common denominator across all of human culture.

A particularly persistent myth among foreigners is that Mexicans are difficult, if not impossible, to understand, due to their inherent tendencies toward isolation. In 1985, Cathryn Thorup noted that few Americans "seem to understand Mexico, despite our long and close
relationship” (Thorup 1985; see also NYT 1985a). This was not for lack of accurate information, especially after the 1960s, when the margins of U.S. consciousness began to broaden, methodologies improved, and the number and quality of Mexicanists soared. Many Mexicans were willing to speak with foreigners and foreigners were willing to listen, catalyzing a fruitful dialogue between U.S. and Mexican scholars.

Yet not all members of the elite chose to incorporate this growing wealth of information into their understanding of Mexico and Mexicans. The new data transcended their maximum limits of consciousness. This is not unusual; most people tailor the information they are willing or able to accept. Thus lacunae can appear in consciousness, whether as the result of incomplete information or of the need to defend established interests. Following paragraphs outline some of the most glaring lacunae, although one must remember that these are generalizations; there are many exceptions to the rule.

The U.S. elite has never conducted a rigorous probe of Mexico’s private sector, even though, during the period under study, this sector frequently showed itself to be as corrupt and inefficient as many of the government institutions that came in for constant (and often accurate) criticism. Little was said, for example, about the poor business practices that characterized Mexico’s banking sector prior to its nationalization in 1982, even though drawing attention to such problems would not have implied any opposition to free-market economies or the business sector. To the contrary, it might well have promoted a more efficient administration. And for purposes of comparison, the business community in the United States is under the constant and highly critical scrutiny of the media and a range of industry watchdogs.

Another gap is the meager attention paid to the coercive structure and perverse workings of the Mexican government. Some scholars might argue that this was a result of incomplete or nonexistent information, but the U.S. government can make no such claim. It has deliberately ignored this subject—even in the face of the very accurate and comprehensive information it has received on Mexico’s corrupt law enforcement organizations and the tactics they employ. A broad range of documents makes reference to the “innumerable police forces that have become symbols of corruption, abuse of power, and in some instances, blatant criminality” (NYT, Feb. 13, 1983). There is also clear evidence that, as early as 1951, the CIA was well aware of

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There are a few critical analyses of the Mexican business sector, but this subject has received little attention in the literature.
the close relationship between Mexico's Federal Security Directorate and some of Mexico's most powerful drug lords (CIA 1951: 58). 3

The government's turning a blind eye has been justified on a number of grounds—for example, that the United States did not wish to intervene in Mexico's internal affairs. The Mexican government welcomed such a justification, which tied in neatly with its nationalist rhetoric. But for the United States' disregard of such issues to be credible required the quiescence of the Mexican population. As Mexican society becomes increasingly articulate and organized, it is attracting the attention of various sectors within the United States.

THE MYTH OF THE PASSIVE MEXICAN

U.S. consciousness is shot through with a thinly veiled contempt toward Mexico which is reflected in a certain fatalism regarding the Mexican population's ability to free itself from authoritarianism and secure a democratic form of government. This point of view was articulated frequently and publicly in the past. Not long after the United States gained independence, John Adams commented that there could never be democracy "amongst the birds, the beasts or the fish, or amongst the peoples of Hispanic America" (in Vázquez 1974). In the early twentieth century, Ambassador James Sheffield insisted that Mexicans could "recognize no argument but force" (L. Meyer 1985: 23). And only a few years ago Alan Riding closed his influential Distant Neighbors with this observation: "in spirit, Mexico is not—and perhaps never will be—a Western nation" (1985: 439). Such ideas are nourished—and intensified—by the United States' poor opinion of the Mexican population's will to struggle.

Both Mexicans and non-Mexicans frequently lament the passivity of the Mexican population in the face of government abuse. On June 29, 1983, the Times suggested that "what is most surprising for foreigners is the calm with which the Mexican system seems to absorb [the damage wrought by the economic crisis]." On July 7, 1984, the paper observed that despite the crisis, Mexican society appeared to display "no rage, nor even any resentment towards the government," and added that instead, there was "a placid resignation." In private, many in the United States were even more explicit.

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3This knowledge came via the U.S. government's long association with these police organizations. In 1982 the U.S. justice system sought an indictment against Miguel Nassar Haro of the DFS for allegedly heading up a group of professional thieves specializing in California luxury cars for resale in Mexico. The CIA halted the indictment, arguing that Nassar Haro was one of their most useful Mexican collaborators (NYT, Mar. 28, 1982).
The author’s research on state coercion and social resistance provided an opportunity to test the veracity of this interpretation and to postulate certain hypotheses. Files and archives, collective and individual memories, all attest to the fact that the regime has quashed a great number of protests and protesters, whose importance has been systematically downplayed or distorted in the Mexican and U.S. media. When these protests and the movements they represented were denied any kind of overt recognition, they suffocated, reinforcing the myth of the passive Mexican.

Not everyone was unaware of the situation in Mexico, however. An active academic current within the United States, which emerged during the 1960s, has helped assemble a more faithful representation of the Mexican government’s transgressions. Evelyn Stevens, Susan Eckstein, Kenneth Johnson, Judith Adler Hellman, and Ellen Lutz, among others, have documented the price paid by those who dared oppose Mexican government authoritarianism. Overall, however, Times coverage, as well as the State Department’s annual reports on human rights in Mexico, reveals that such analyses have failed to penetrate the consciousness of the majority in the United States, which remains comfortable with the myth of the passive Mexican and a reformist president courageously dealing with the reactionary dinosaurs in his government.

These lacunae allow the United States to justify its continued support for the authoritarian Mexican regime and to defend its own interests. They also reflect the extreme U.S. concern over the potential ungovernability of its neighbor, as well as the desire for extraordinarily broad margins of security. The United States has always protested even the slightest threat of ungovernability in Mexico, whether it came from the Left or the Right. In 1986 the Times quoted a U.S. diplomat who urged the PAN to forget “about hunger-strikes and protesters,” and instead “become more organized, gather funds, and work hard at providing the people with a real alternative to the PRI” (NYT, July 13, 1986). Would his advice be the same today, following the July 1997 elections? All must now be reevaluated in the context of a general transformation of U.S. perceptions of Mexico.

SILENCE ON THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

The most remarkable and important gap in understanding was the generalized disinterest of scholars, journalists, and government officials regarding the United States’ impact on Mexican affairs. While many Mexicans have blamed the United States for everything imaginable, many Americans have done the opposite: with the exception of a few leftist analysts, they have never even considered the possi-
bility that U.S. policies could produce negative repercussions in Mexico.

For example, the U.S. government and media often criticized Mexico for allowing the Soviets and Cubans to operate intelligence units on Mexican soil, but they rarely mentioned (and certainly never denounced) the fact that the United States' own intelligence services were also operating there. This was not the result of ignorance; a broad range of official documents bore witness to the many operations of U.S. intelligence services in Mexico. Even the Times was well aware, for example, that "the CIA has an extensive representation" in Mexico (NYT, June 23, 1985).

U.S. specialists on Mexico's national security also failed to acknowledge their country's role. One such was Lieutenant Colonel Alden M. Cunningham, who admitted (though only in a footnote) that "space limitations only permit acknowledging that other important national security factors also exist. These would be the United States-Mexican relationships, moral renovation, demographic initiatives" (Cunningham 1984).

This phenomenon was similar to that which colored the U.S. media's coverage of Mexico's private sector. That is, in the United States, the activities and operations of the security and intelligence services are closely monitored, but in Mexico these same services are given free rein. This silence was born of an extraordinarily important assumption: the U.S. elite simply cannot imagine that any of their actions could negatively impact their southern neighbor. This assumption—founded on the premise that the United States is an exceptional nation and that its interests and Mexico's are common and shared—has always been accepted, and never examined, much less proven.

Such basic and deeply rooted assumptions produced important consequences. If the United States is, by definition, no threat to Mexico's security, then Mexican nationalism can be nothing more than an irrational (and irritating) refusal to cooperate fully with a powerful potential ally. But although the two nations do have a number of shared interests—the war on drugs is one example—there are many other areas where there is no concordance. It is also clear that many U.S. policies have had far-reaching repercussions on Mexico. Refusing to acknowledge this fact can only perpetuate a series of baseless myths and fantasies—and generate a detrimental feedback effect on reality.

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1Examples include Cunningham 1984; Ronfeldt 1984; Moorer and Fauriol 1984; Applegate 1985. An exception is Dziedzic (1996), who acknowledges this influence but does not develop it.

2For a discussion of the United States' impact on Mexico's security, see Aguayo 1990.

3For examples of this, see DAF 1955; DOS 1956, 1959; Fauriol 1988; Ganster and Sweedler 1987; Wilson 1989.
PRESERVING MYTHS

When analyzing an extensive body of writings by journalists, scholars, government officials, and others who have sought to tread lightly around difficult questions and thorny subjects (a mind-set that cross-cuts national boundaries), we begin to find traces of the techniques they used and to see how these strategies may play a role in the construction and preservation of myths. One of the most effective means for detecting a particular author’s (or newspaper’s) leanings is to note the author’s (or paper’s) sources. For the Times, this was the members of Mexico’s political and economic elite—clearly the sector to which the Times could best relate.

To look at how this coverage might have differed, we need only compare it with the Times coverage of a government that the United States had no interest in protecting: Fidel Castro’s Cuba. Content analysis of a sample of Times articles on revolutionary Cuba published in the early 1960s reveals that the paper frequently quoted the opposition and maintained a systematically critical and skeptical attitude toward the statements of the Cuban government. The opening sentence of a 1960 article is representative: “Cuba begins its second year under Castro’s regime with fear and uncertainty, despite the rosy panorama painted by the government” (NYT, Jan. 13, 1960). Official reports were clearly being rejected out of hand; opposition statements dominated throughout the remainder of the article.

Another useful strategy used in “shading” U.S. analyses of Mexico involves references to time and place. This technique was apparent in a 1986 article by James Reston: “there are those in the United States who would rather focus on political corruption and the one-party system, rather than recall that, unlike the rest of Latin America, the Mexican government has been able to maintain the peace and avoid a military dictatorship for over half a century” (Reston 1986). Clearly the Mexican system, warts and all, still compared favorably with those of other countries, and therefore it should be supported and maintained. It is worth mentioning that this mechanism has recently fallen into disuse; a global wave of democracy and the collapse of socialism have made it increasingly difficult to make favorable comparisons between Mexico and other countries.

Another technique involves the use of fragmentary analyses that hinder the development of a global vision. This ploy has proved particularly effective for relieving Mexico’s presidents of blame by disassociating them from the political system’s most negative aspects. From Miguel Alemán to Ernesto Zedillo, topics such as repression,

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local political bossism, corruption, or electoral fraud have all been described as being totally separated from the president in office, who is usually portrayed as an embattled reformer struggling to overcome retrograde opponents. It is rarely noted that individuals who reach the apex of political power in Mexico must necessarily be highly skilled at manipulating even the most sinister aspects of the system in their favor. This tactic is complemented by a total disinclination to examine the biographies of Mexico’s presidents once out of office, which belie the myth—restated every six years like a revelation from heaven—of their vocation of democracy.

Understanding how such mechanisms work is particularly important because researchers in the United States have earned a reputation for objectivity. Deliberate lies or the kind of governmental control long tolerated by the Mexican media have rarely featured in the U.S. press. What has been present, however, is a subtle process of interpretation that “massaged” thinking along a certain course. Whether this process was deliberate or unconscious varies case by case, but its pervasiveness confirms a pattern of selective denial of certain realities.

These considerations lead naturally to a discussion of the United States’ belief in its own exceptional character. While living and studying in the United States for extended periods, the author developed a profound respect for the openness of this society and the deeply rooted consciousness of its citizens, which allows them to defend their rights and keep a tight rein on the activities of their government and business sectors. And, of course, one must acknowledge the United States’ vast, indeed overwhelming, economic and military might. However, its continued support for an authoritarian and corrupt Mexican regime belies its self-image. How can the exceptional citizens of an exceptional country have persisted so long in their support for actions and policies that directly contradict their ideals of democracy and good government? The most obvious answer is that, for a long time, this support was believed to be in the best interests of the United States. (The idea that U.S. interests might include a more democratic Mexico has gained currency only very recently.) In effect, in foreign policy terms the United States behaves much like any other power.

The evidence collected in this volume reveals that, although in some cases the United States’ vaunted rigor and objectivity is a reality, in other cases it is only a myth. Information and ideas became a privileged instrument for the maintenance of relationships of domination between the two countries, and for the preservation of the established order. For the majority of the Mexican population, this was to have disastrous consequences.
HEGEMONY AND COERCION

This brings us back to the very first questions posed in this book. What is the true extent and nature of the United States' impact on Mexico's history? What have been the costs and benefits to Mexico of being this superpower's neighbor? What role has the United States played, or can it play, in shaping a fairer and more democratic Mexico? Let us risk a few answers in what is still a very hazy area.

We cannot take the easy way out—blaming the United States for every Mexican crisis and misfortune. Mexico's government and society must shoulder a large share of responsibility for the prolonged and multidimensional crisis that has gripped the country since the 1970s. However, we cannot ignore the enormous impact of the United States on Mexican history. To shed some light on this hitherto cryptic topic—and perhaps assign at least some measure of responsibility—we must begin to unravel the true nature of this impact.

Any appraisal of the relationship between the two countries must recognize its most salient feature: since the earliest days of their independent existence, there has been a huge disparity in terms of power, and the United States has dominated Mexico continuously through varying combinations of hegemony and coercion. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the principal instrument was brute force, justified with moral arguments based on myths of racial and cultural superiority. For example, the Mexican War of 1846, in which Mexico lost half its territory, was "a war of valued conquest, covered in a coloring cloak of holy justification called 'Manifest Destiny'" (Virden 1957). And Woodrow Wilson's intervention in Veracruz in 1914 was purportedly intended to help Mexico attain a greater level of democracy.

The era of brute force ended in 1927, when Ambassador Morrow and President Calles reached an understanding whose intricacies were to have a fundamental effect upon Mexican history in the twentieth century. Washington has since tended to emphasize hegemony as its policy tool of choice, and coercion has become rare. This emphasis on hegemony results in part from the nature of the two government systems and the countries' close geographic proximity (any miscalculation on the part of the U.S. government can have immediate repercussions upon U.S. territory) but also because the Mexican government has proved itself able to maintain stability and willing to respect the interests of the United States.

For these reasons, and because Mexico's leadership has always adhered to certain implicit restrictions, the U.S. elite tolerated policies and outbursts from Mexican officials that under other circumstances

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*This war was justified, in one way or another, by most of the U.S. analysts who have written about it. See, for example, Bauer 1956; Rees 1960; Logfren 1967; Swan 1983.*
would have been unacceptable. A high-ranking official from the Bush administration explained this attitude quite clearly:

It is true that we allowed the Mexicans to behave in ways that would be unacceptable in other governments. We did so because we knew that in their attitude there is a great deal of rhetoric; their actions never go beyond certain implicit limits. If, during negotiations, we became stalled on a point they did not like, they immediately resorted to hypernationalism. We would sit back and listen, because we knew that this was something transitory, which would pose no real obstacles for the solution of concrete problems (author interview).

Despite any and all "implicit limits," it is clear that Mexican governments have enjoyed broad margins for action, especially when compared to other Latin American countries. An important question, then, is: How well has Mexico exploited these broad margins for maneuver? The governments that arose from the Mexican Revolution were able to carry out a novel economic experiment, develop an independent diplomacy, and reject at least some U.S. demands. In exchange for the freedom to take these steps toward Mexican self-determination, they gave way on other points to ally more closely with U.S. interests.

The Mexican government was usually persuaded to make concessions through rational arguments but coercion was used when needed. The Republicans, rather than the Democrats, were probably more prone to use coercion. However, whenever the U.S. government decided to use pressure against Mexico, it was implemented unilaterally and without warning—and it always produced results, which leads to the following points.

THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICAN NATIONALISM

These final pages reflect on the relationship between the United States and Mexican nationalism and on the challenges that Mexico faces in the closing years of the twentieth century. One of the most frustrating characteristics of Mexico's political transition has been its glacial pace—that is, the regime's capacity to resist change. This has been explained in various ways. Kevin Middlebrook has suggested that labor movements and their activities have been key to the regime's extraordinary longevity (Middlebrook 1995: 288). Other analysts have emphasized the sophistication of Mexico's political classes, the regime's inclusive character, the passivity of the Mexican population (sometimes attributed to the present-day population's indigenous
roots), the opposition's inability to reach even limited accords, and/or the use of coercion.

Although such explanations may be valid, the PRI's survival has been greatly enhanced by the support of the international community, and in particular the United States. The United States' financial aid to Mexico and its colossal disinterest in Mexico's pro-democracy movements have no precedent in recent history. Impoverished and marginalized activists for democracy, challenging an affluent and entrenched regime, must figure prominently in any analysis of recent developments in Mexico.

The United States—theoretically a bastion of democracy—has repeatedly had to justify its continuing support for an authoritarian regime. To do so, it most frequently simply overlooked the most problematic aspects of Mexican reality. These were excised from the American consciousness and banished into the black hole of forgotten knowledge. On other occasions, Washington justified its policies on the grounds that they laid a foundation for a brilliant, though still unachieved, future and were, therefore, in Mexico's best interests. One of the most paradoxical justifications appears in a State Department document from the Reagan era:

> [E]very dictatorship—both of the left and of the right—perpetrates grave violations of human rights. Every human rights violation, furthermore, should be condemned. However, inasmuch as non-communist dictatorships are able, in varying degrees, to evolve in a democratic direction, communist dictatorships are especially resistant to democratization (DOS 1984: 10).

Thirteen years after these lines were written, the majority of the world's Communist dictatorships are fading into history, but the authoritarian Mexican regime is still in place (although the PRI's electoral defeats in 1997 appear to signal the beginning of the end).

Not every sector within the U.S. elite agreed with this Reagan-era perspective. Over the last three decades an important number of academics, journalists, politicians, and members of social organizations have become increasingly critical of the Mexican regime's rampant corruption and inefficiency, its violation of human rights, and the absence of democracy. While such views will ultimately entail some reversion in U.S. policies toward Mexico, and their supposedly beneficial and benign nature, until recently these ideas have been confined to limited sectors of U.S. society.

Why did the United States decide to support the PRI so firmly and unquestioningly? The usual response is that this party gave the United States what it was looking for: stability in Mexico. But this argument is flawed; the system's potential for instability has always
been high. During the last thirty years Mexico has suffered cyclical economic crises, the country's foreign debt has soared from U.S.$3 billion in 1970 to over $100 billion in 1996, political upheavals (both peaceful and violent) have become commonplace, the population's living standard has been brutally undercut, and drug trafficking and crime have skyrocketed.

Then perhaps the United States' support was due to the fact that there was no actor dedicated to a continuing and systematic broadening of its margins of collective consciousness. Unlike the Irish, Israelis, Central Americans, and others, Mexicans who opposed their government were, for a long time, unable to promote their cause—a more democratic Mexico—in the United States. Their ability to lobby in the United States was hindered by obstacles to consciousness among both Mexicans and Americans; and perhaps one of the greatest of these obstacles has been Mexican nationalism.

After its defeat and loss of territory in 1848 (and after a whole series of other European and U.S. intrusions), Mexico turned inward behind a barrier of mistrust. Foreigners were viewed as hostile, and Mexicans were urged to unite against them. For example, President Luis Echeverría noted in his fourth State of the Nation Address that "in 1848 we lost half of the territory inherited from our Indian and Spanish forefathers, as a result of an unfair war with the United States of America" (Echeverría 1974: 22). Echeverría's words sum up some of the central theses of a nationalism that arose from a revolution against the excesses of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship and/or the constant interventions by Western powers. During the early decades of the twentieth century, such ideas served as a healing balm, helping make some sense of the death and destruction that accompanied the Revolution. Nationalism also played an important role in the construction of new institutions, helping the elite win and hold the support of the masses. It was a key referent for national identity and guided government actions and policies in a hostile, seemingly incomprehensible world.

The revolutionaries' fiery nationalism was eventually tempered by pragmatism, and by 1927 they had established an understanding with the United States, an implied understanding cloaked in ambiguity from its inception. In time, the Revolution became bureaucratized, and nationalism and the United States became important symbols in the Mexican elite's rhetorical efforts to hold on to power and privilege. And at some point nationalism and its associated revolutionary myths ceased to be a collective dream, to be converted into a mechanism of control with little relation to day-to-day existence in Mexico—in the process undermining the credibility of the institutions that had been erected on the foundation of nationalism and its myths (see Basáñez 1991).
By presenting the United States as a potential threat, the Mexican government had also been able to restrain Mexicans who sought to bring global attention to the country’s problems, as well as to legitimate its call for national unity around a regime that portrayed itself as the real champion of national integrity and sovereignty. Although there have been moments in Mexican history when a united front against threats from the United States or elsewhere has been critically important, over the last fifty years the United States has been anything but an enemy of the regime, and any threat is far more imagined than real. In fact, Washington has been one of the regime’s closest allies; even when it resorted to coercion, it did so as an adversary, not an enemy.

The United States elite cooperated fully with the regime’s posturings. It not only ignored or glossed over certain events in Mexico, it also maintained a discreet silence in response to the nationalistic exhortations of the regime, having received private assurances from the government that Washington should not take its public pronouncements to heart. The United States also had a fairly clear view of public opinion in Mexico. From 1946 to 1980 the only opinion polls on Mexican attitudes toward the United States were those carried out by the U.S. government. These revealed that Mexico was not unlike other countries in Latin America: a portion of the population distrusted the United States, another group expressed pro-American views, and the remainder wavered between the two positions (Favela and Morales 1991). Polls carried out after Mexico’s economic opening reveal that anti-American sentiment has declined (Poll 1992). This explains the Mexican population’s weak opposition to NAFTA and the government’s claim that proximity to the United States is, after all, a blessing, not a curse.

The United States’ indifference toward Mexican nationalism was often in evidence. In 1958 a Times editorial noted that “traditional anti-Yankee feeling is a political artifice, and not a reality” among Mexicans (NYT 1958b). In 1980, Alan Riding commented that “despite the nationalistic rhetoric espoused by a number of governments, the Mexicans are not anti-American” (NYT, Nov. 9, 1980). And Ronfeldt, Nehring, and Gándara (1980: 47) observed that Mexico’s “nationalist symbolism has served to embellish internal rhetoric, parochial demagoguery, and bureaucratic maneuvering.” In 1984, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico John Gavin informed correspondent Richard Meislin that “a number of Mexican government officials,” with whom he had an extremely “cordial relationship” and who would often privately “praise the help provided by the United States,” would on other occasions “publicly criticize him and the United States” (NYT, Nov. 11, 1984).
The United States even found Mexico’s official posturing to be useful because it cajoled many of the world’s revolutionaries and neutralized and isolated Mexico’s more genuinely nationalistic and far more disquieting Left. For the U.S. elite, Mexico’s official nationalism became a paper tiger: sleek and threatening, but with little real substance.

The understanding between Mexico and the United States has produced different consequences for each. Mexico has always been only a marginal concern for the United States. But for Mexico, its neighbor to the north has long been, in equal parts, an enigma and an obsession, despite the fact that the population has, until recently, affected an attitude of indifference. This feigned indifference, the result of a traumatic nineteenth-century conflict, was an unwise strategy. Mexico forgot that knowledge and intelligence are critical tools that a weak nation can use to guide its deployment of scarce resources for maximum effect. As border areas have become increasingly integrated, ignorance has allowed the Mexican population to imagine a host of conspiracies originating in Washington, while they have failed to realize that the real threat for Mexico comes from a rigid, corrupt, and inefficient political system.

When the history of these two societies is written, it will note that this situation began to change in the 1970s, when a vast intellectual effort finally provided better and more critical evaluations of Mexico’s political system and its ruling class, as well as an increasingly thorough understanding of the United States which eschewed both excessive praise and unthinking criticism. This book forms part of a revisionist school (which has yet to identify itself as such) that has been nurtured by a decades-long dialogue among scholars. Over these three decades, many Mexicans have learned to understand the United States as a vehicle for serving their own national interests. As perceptions have become less simplistic, tolerance has grown and relationships have improved. If Mexicans of divergent viewpoints had not intensified their relationship with the United States, we might not have access today to writings that challenge the rosy panorama sketched out by the two governments.

The final years of the twentieth century have proved to be a difficult period, one of uncertainty and crumbling myths. Mexico’s July 1997 elections, which seem to mark a watershed for Mexican authoritarianism, raise complex new challenges. Mexico urgently needs a development model that will allow it to achieve democracy, social justice, and sovereignty. Will it reach these goals? If so, how and when? As Mexico debates its choices, the United States must make some decisions as well, based on national priorities and a reevaluation of Mexican reality.
Neither a simplistic rejection of neoliberalism nor a nostalgia for the populism of days gone by will suffice. What is needed are new intellectual and political proposals that will allow us to reconceptualize the past. One important future task will be to reevaluate the Mexican Revolution. Were the foundational principles and aspirations of the Mexican Revolution in error? Are the men who were charged with bringing these principles and goals to fruition to blame? Or does the fault lie with an anemic society that tolerated the abuses? And regardless of who is to blame, what was the role of the U.S. elite?

This is not merely an intellectual exercise. It has political relevance, for as we consider what really happened and develop proposals about what should be done in the future, we must continue to dismantle the structures of authoritarianism and create democratic institutions that allow us to achieve the kind of consensus needed to overcome an obsolete presidentialism. The task will be arduous. Mexican democracy faces complex obstacles, set in place by a cunning and still deeply entrenched authoritarian regime and culture, and by a superpower long convinced that its national security is linked to the perpetuation of a single party in Mexico.

Despite all obstacles, change continues. The Mexican government has lost control over much of society, and its monopoly over the nation's channels of communication with the outside is crumbling rapidly. Mexico City, the Chamber of Deputies, and several state governments are now in the hands of the opposition. The population is poised to take on authoritarianism and to call upon world opinion in its struggle. Slowly but surely, U.S. consciousness regarding Mexico has broadened, nourishing a new critical attitude among scholars and journalists. Will these new ideas influence Washington's traditional and absolute support for the Mexican leadership? Will an important change in attitude—foreshadowed in President Clinton's 1997 meeting with opposition leaders—take root? If so, what will be the results, and when will they become apparent?

In all likelihood a growing chorus of Mexican voices will be heard in the United States, creating awareness and broadening consciousness in a polyphonic concerto in which one melody is carried by those who support the incumbent regime and the other by those who hope for change, all singing together but absent a conductor. In 1997, the second melody, the voice of change, was strongest. If it prevails, we shall have to revise another assumption: that the U.S. elite is always and in every circumstance an obstacle to democracy and change.

The future calls for a mature and democratic nationalism, in tune with a pantheon of myths where past, present, and future merge; a pantheon that is permanently revised and updated through scientific reason and patriotic passion. Ideally, this new pantheon of myths will contain a more exact view of the United States, and will allow Mexico
to achieve its maximum potential for independence as neighbor to a superpower. To attain this view by accumulating knowledge and intelligence, to maintain it and continue to build on it, these will be the threads guiding Mexico's evolution in the twenty-first century.