

3-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Miguel I. Estrada Samano, *For a Better Understanding between Mexico and the United States*, 12 U.S.-Mex. L.J. 137 (2004).
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/usmexlj/vol12/iss1/21>

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FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

MIGUEL I. ESTRADA SÁMANO*

I am very honored to have this opportunity to exchange dialogue. I would like to suggest a few topics that may encourage all of us to consider the general need for a better understanding between Mexico and the United States, and specifically a better understanding between the legal communities of the two countries.

Being friends means many different things. Among other things, it means getting to know one another, being understanding with a counterpart, and being respectful. In many instances, the two friends that lie north and south of the *Río Bravo* (or *Río Grande*) have not behaved as friends. While there are a number of explanations for this mutual behavior, perhaps the basic issue is one of ignorance. By gaining greater knowledge about one another and taking positive steps, the two countries could better understand each other and act in a more constructive and cooperative manner.

Although the United States' behavior towards Mexico in the past is of utmost interest, focusing on this aspect of the relationship serves no purpose in this case, and could be very time-consuming. Instead of focusing on the past, we should look to the future and try to establish a better relationship. We must do this because we are next to each other and can do nothing about it.

As far as Mexico is concerned, the United States has generally not understood Mexico's political system in the past, and is only now beginning to start thinking about it. Many lies have been told to try to explain what Mexico suffered during the twentieth century. This may be a reason why Mexico's political system is misunderstood in the United States. Many times, such lies have been expressed through euphemisms, such as the one referring to the "dominant party."¹ Many other times, ignorance came from the fact that--let me just say it clearly--the abominable regime that we suffered in Mexico was supported to some extent by the U.S. Government. The lack of knowledge and curiosity, and in many instances, the simple interest of participating in the mafia system that was the regime in Mexico during the twentieth century, rendered the task of understanding difficult.

For several decades, Mexico suffered an incredibly clever, sometimes "diabolic" political system that was so strong that even the few of us who were fighting against

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1. The "dominant party" refers to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), or the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which was in power for 71 years before Vicente Fox of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), or the National Action Party, was elected in 2000. The PRI is often described as more of a regime or an "official" party than a "dominant" party. There is evidence of election rigging so that the PRI could maintain control of the government. See Ginger Thompson, *Ex-President in Mexico Casts Light on Rigged 1988 Election*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 9, 2004, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/09/international/americas>.

it thought it impossible to remove during our lifetimes.² Yet things are different now. It is plain to see that a totally unexpected and dramatic—even magical—change occurred in Mexico in the year 2000. This change was due to many factors, including the 1968 students' movement in Mexico as well as the great effort devoted to bringing about change in the years prior to 2000. Of course, as we see now, the present governmental administration has produced some poor results, but the change of political system is still a very positive thing.

At the risk of sounding arrogant, let me tell you that I was one of those who endangered their lives for decades prior to 1968, when it was very difficult to fight against the political establishment in Mexico. During those years, voicing some of the opinions included in this paper was extremely risky. Many told us that we were crazy and it was useless to try to change the politics of Mexico; we were told that the political establishment of Mexico was un-removable and it was unwise to act hostile toward it. Now, it is clear that what occurred in Mexico at the beginning of this millennium was the consequence of several decades of a heroic, ignored, and discrete effort, but which nevertheless resulted in drastic change.

Mexico has changed in a very basic but dramatic sense. The old political establishment was based on the existence of a group of mostly quite able people who were the rulers of the country and headed by a "god." We had a theocracy, which is far worse than a monarchy. Mexican presidents were considered "gods," and the few of us who dared to act disrespectfully towards one of them, even in private, risked the possibility of being labeled first as stupid, second as crazy, and finally as useless. However, the evidence is now obvious that we were not useless.

I am convinced that Mexico has forever abandoned a political system where the will of one single individual is the only important will in the country. This abandonment became apparent shortly before 2000, but it was the result of a prolonged effort that began long before 2000. Now, who the President is, and even how foolish or ignorant the President may be, has a very secondary importance to the system as a whole. Mexico has abandoned the old establishment, and the PRI as it was has disappeared. The PRI was never a "political party" prior to 2000; the PRI was simply the electoral instrument of the "god," who used it to politically dominate the country through illegitimate, non-confessable links. However, it must be noted that the situation was, in fact, extremely productive for many. I do not know of any other country that has produced the incredible fortunes like the ones that individuals loyal to Mexico's old establishment were able to amass for themselves. But that situation is also starting to change as Mexico makes the big jump out of a theocracy.

Thus, it is improbable that the old establishment consisting of one so-called "dominant party," which was not a party since it was only an instrument of the government and, even worse, of the dominating mafia in the government, will ever return. That system had no ideology. Think of it in these terms: that "party" was the party of Lázaro Cárdenas,³ an extreme leftist, as well as the party of Miguel

2. See Gerry Foley, *Election Upset in Mexico*, SOCIALIST ACTION (July 8, 2000), at <http://www.socialistaction.org/news/200007/fox.html>.

3. Lázaro Cárdenas was the President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940 and was known for both his honesty and his radicalism. See Jim Tuck, *Mr. Clean: The Phenomenon of Lázaro Cárdenas*, MEXICO CONNECT (Mar. 10, 2004), at http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_history/jtuck/jtlcardenas.html.

Alemán,⁴ an extreme rightist, with no problem. The individuals who were members of the “party” were unconditional of both men. We had a “nationalization,”⁵ for example, of the banking system, and the same individuals who applauded that nationalization applauded the privatization--obviously a step in the opposite direction--a few years later. This was all under the PRI. That cannot be called a “party.” Thus, as a result of decades of corruption, Mexico is still far from having the instruments it so badly needs to build a democracy.

The old establishment cannot be considered a decent group of human beings. The PRI was basically a business opportunity for a large group of abusive and cynical individuals who did not care about ideology or, more importantly, about the destiny of Mexico. However, the old establishment has disappeared to such an extent that even the PRI might now evolve into one or several new political parties. This would be a great surprise. The PRI is getting organized. Yet the allowances that provoked the political atmosphere under the old establishment also resulted in the destruction of what was my party, the PAN.⁶ That party was a party, and now it is a sort of second-class agency that places people, mostly ill-prepared people, in positions of power and remuneration. Unfortunately, it consists ideologically only of emptiness and lack of purpose. However, I must also mention the possibility of a leftist organization finally appearing as a Mexican political party. I am convinced that, strictly speaking, Mexico currently lacks political parties. A high priority for our country is building up political parties that may be in a real position to exert influence from their different points of view.

Now, all of this may be too general, but my hope is that it will provoke dialogue. The purpose of this quick introduction is to ask that the United States, as a friend, devote itself to the effort of getting to know Mexico. In general, let me say humbly, I think that the Mexican people know the American people far better than the American people know the Mexican people. In that respect, I always recommend the book *Mexico, A Land of Volcanoes*⁷ to help foreigners get a bit closer to Mexico, which is a very complex country. Various pre-Colombian cultures were more abundant in Mexico than in other regions of Latin America, which makes Mexico a real mosaic of different cultures and very unique in this way. Thus, *Mexico, A Land of Volcanoes* also has an important message for the reader: not everything that works in the United States works in Mexico. Mexico is Mexico, and it is very different from the United States.

Despite differences between Mexico and the U.S., both countries should try to facilitate a closer, more understanding relationship. The two countries must endeavor to become better friends, not in the sense of chatting nicely, but in the sense of a far deeper understanding.

4. Miguel Alemán was President of Mexico from 1946 to 1952. Alemán actually changed the name of the National Revolutionary Party to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to indicate the permanent status of the Revolution. His administration was marked by a vigorous program of modernization. AllRefer Encyclopedia, *Miguel Alemán*, Mexican History (Biographies) (Mar. 10, 2004) at <http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/A/Aleman-Mig.html>.

5. See Claudio Katz, *New Economic Turbulence, Latin America*, INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT (Mar. 10, 2004), at <http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2001/IV331/IV331%2006.htm>.

6. *Partido Acción Nacional* or National Action Party. See the official website at <http://www.pan.org.mx/>.

7. J. Joseph H.L. Schlarman, *MEXICO, A LAND OF VOLCANOES (FROM CORTÉS TO ALEMÁN)* (Bruce Publishing Co. 1950).

