

GAVIN'S RESIGNATION DRAWS A STRONG RESPONSE

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When John Gavin announced his resignation as U.S. Ambassador in Mexico, the passionate controversy that surrounded his tour of office was unleashed all over again.

There is very little information available here that helps to explain John Gavin's resignation as U.S. ambassador to Mexico. We simply do not know if the decision was made in some State Department office in Washington, or if after five years of constant frictions and misunderstandings with a variety of our government agencies, Mexican patience finally ran out after some new problem.

For those who view the situation from the point of view of Gavin's unusually long term (five years), the resignation was, in fact, overdue. These same analysts feel that Gavin should have left several months ago. For others, his resignation seemed premature, or at least surprising because it came earlier than they expected. They expressed surprise based on the widely-acknowledged gentleman's agreement between the actor and former head of the Screen Actors Guild in the U.S., and President Ronald Reagan, that Gavin would hold his post until the end of Reagan's term.

At any rate, Gavin's performance as ambassador from 1981 to May 16, 1986 demands a reevaluation of the terms of the diplomatic relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Bad Memories

It is quite clear now that Mexico harbors no fond

memories of Gavin, despite the fact that when he took his post five years ago, it seemed that he would be popular with both Mexican public opinion, and even the Mexican government. His mother is of Mexican origin, he speaks Spanish quite well and he is a Hollywood star, which in itself is often enough to generate charisma. In addition, he had

played Pedro Paramo, the famous Juan Rulfo character, and that warmed Mexico's cultural pride. His physical attractiveness was also well-known to TV viewers who frequently saw him in Bacardi rum commercials.

Gavin also had a series of political factors in his favor when he began. For Mexicans, the relationship with the United States is vital, and the U.S. ambassador is almost always a very important public figure here. Gavin's predecessor, Julian Nava, maintained a very low profile and was extremely passive during his entire tour of duty. In Mexican government circles, it is commonly held that there is no real difference between Republicans and Democrats in their positions with regards to Mexico. Thus, no

one expected Gavin to make any big changes.

But they were wrong. Diplomatic relations underwent major changes and became strained beyond the normal tension that has traditionally marked the relationship between Mexico and the United States.

News of Gavin's resignation was announced first to the U.S. press corps in Mexico, even before President Miguel de la Madrid was advised. Thus, as he had carried out his charge, so he brought it to a close, with totally unorthodox proceedings. His style, for one last time, provoked a wave of strong reactions on the part of Mexican officials and press. And it became clear, that at least in terms of public relations, Washington's emissary had been a failure.

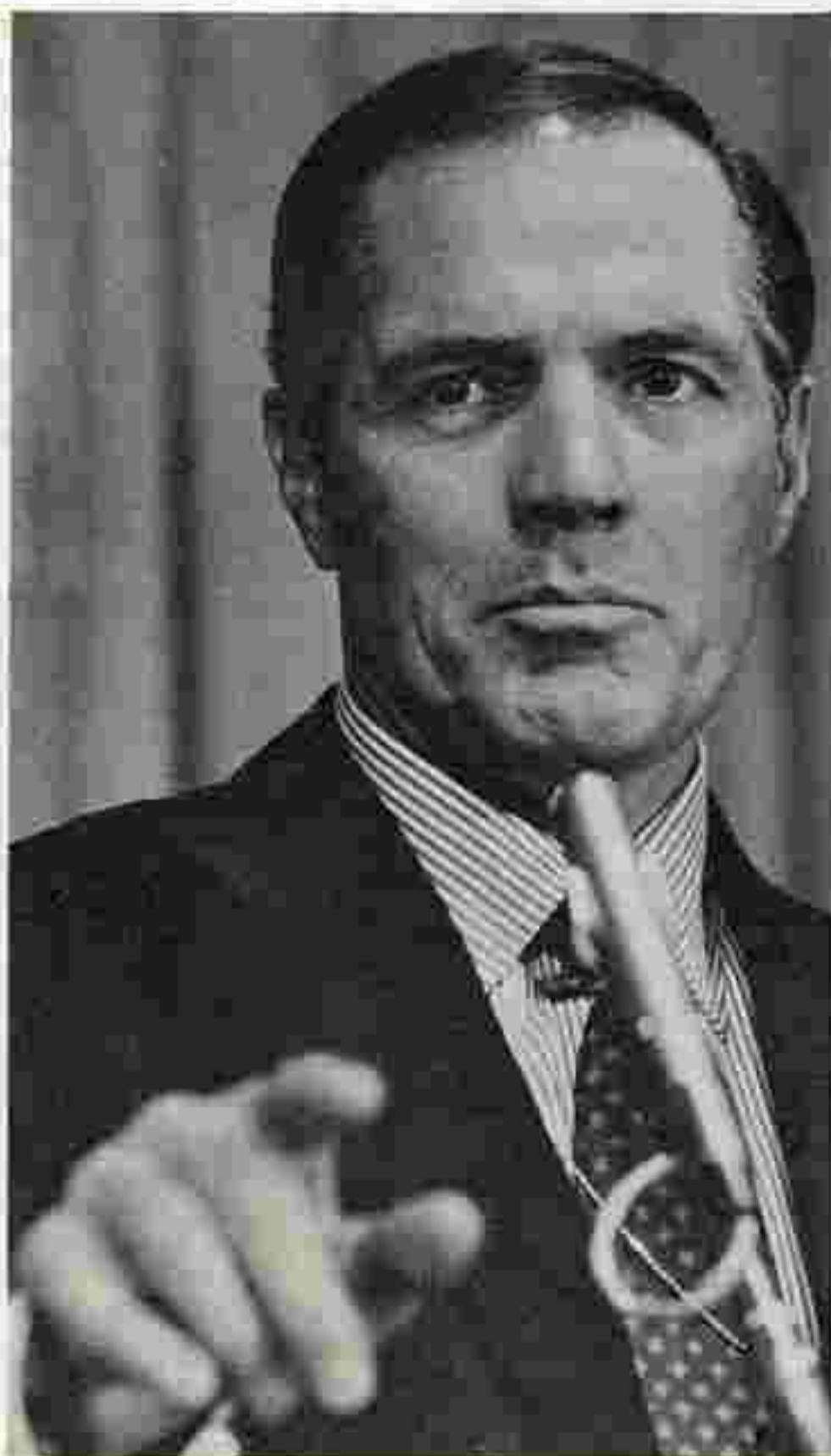
The first reaction of a Mexican diplomat who was notified by phone was, "Great!"

The front page headline of Mexico City's largest morning paper was, "Whew! Gavin's Leaving!"

According to one very high-level Mexican official, Gavin was a "hyperactive diplomat." He was involved in activities that took him well beyond traditional diplomatic spheres. He gave his opinion, exerted pressures and took actions on issues related to the country's courts, commerce, domestic policy, electoral campaigns, religious and even military affairs.

In general, it can be said that diverse sectors of Mexican society held a markedly negative opinion of Gavin. Acapulco's Chamber of Tourism commented that his resignation was "favorable for the country." Artist Jose Luis Cuevas, who on one occasion had said that Gavin would have been better directed by Alfred Hitchcock than by Ronald Reagan, stated, "We hope that he goes back to making films and commercials; he'll be less dangerous that way."

Naturally, all of the political parties on the left celebrated Gavin's departure. But Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM) leader, Pablo Gomez, wrote, "The



Gavin: "I want YOU". Photo by Renzo Gestoli.

pressures on Mexico will continue anyway, even without Gavin around." The conservative, National Action Party (PAN) that often received open displays of Gavin's support, decided not to comment on the matter so as to avoid having to defend a man who had evoked so many critical opinions.

In the Mexican press, a frequent target of Gavin's defamatory comments and irony-laden criticisms, political cartoonists responded with virtually unprecedented consensus in their cartoons on the subject. That rare phenomenon occurred on April 8th. If there was a common denominator to all of the political cartoons that day, it could be summed up as "joy." The following are descriptions of some of their work as it appeared in Mexico City's major newspapers. In *Excelsior*, Marino draws a silhouette of the Ambassador with two wounds in his back, one labeled Sonora and the other labeled Chihuahua.

In *El Universal*, Naranjo has Gavin saying, "I'll ask Ron to send you Bob Hope!" Helióflores drew a newspaperboy in the street calling out the day's headline, "Gavinette Resigns." ("Renuncia el Gavinate;" in Spanish the play on words is with gabinete-cabinet. The cartoonist substituted a "v" for the "b" so that the word becomes a pejorative form of Gavin's name).

In *La Jornada*, Magu, with his customary super-ugly style, drew Gavin with his letter of resignation in one hand and a telephone receiver in the other. He is saying, "I don't know how I'm going to get out or here. The highways are so dangerous, but it's even worse to get into an airplane." This was a reference to a recent Gavin campaign against the supposed dangers on Mexico's highways and to the recent Mexicana Airlines crash.

Fisgon, in the same newspaper, has Gavin dressed as a clown and saying, "And after improving our country's bilateral relations, I can now move on." The

audience is roaring with laughter, and one of the spectators at the show says, "Next time, send us Jerry Lewis for ambassador."

The Novedades cartoonist, Rossas, drew a man-in-the-street who comments, "Everyone who's going around celebrating Gavin's resignation ought to remember that better the devil you know than the devil you don't." And a street dog responds, "Joel Poinsett, Henry Lane Wilson..." Novedades is owned by one of the most important stock-holders in the Televisa consortium (Mexico's largest electronic media corporation). Televisa follows a very conservative line and was quite accommodating to Gavin's whims.

Gavin's tour as ambassador gave a new stylistic twist to Mexico-U.S. diplomatic relations. Previously, Washington gave relatively little importance to the ambassadorship in Mexico. In fact, during the Carter administration the State Department opened a separate office called the Mexican Affairs Coordinator that was responsible for

overseeing bilateral relationships at the appropriate official levels for trade, agriculture, fisheries, livestock, finances, tourism, customs, drug-trafficking, etc. That office disappeared when Gavin became ambassador, and he, himself, directly took over the reins on all of those bilateral matters. In addition, he began to play an active role in Mexico's internal affairs and publically defended his right to do so.

Half way through his time as ambassador, he committed what was an unpardonable sin for the Mexican political system. Gavin, in his public activities, promoted the U.S. position in favor of a two-party system for Mexico. In the midst of the electoral campaigns in the country's northern states, he attended high level meetings held in the zone by the Catholic Church and by the conservative, opposition National Action Party (PAN).

The political system mobilized against Gavin. The House of Representatives passed a statement condemning the Ambassador's intromission in Mexican internal affairs. Gavin

responded by deriding his right to act publically in favor of the PAN. The Executive Branch made no comment on the matter, but it was obvious that any hopes for harmony had been shattered.

At the beginning of last year, a new crisis occurred, in which Gavin's rough style further alienated Mexican diplomatic circles. After the murder of Enrique Camarena Salazar, an agent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, Washington launched "Operation Inteccept" along its border with Mexico. Gavin added spice to the already "hypertensive climate" (as it was characterized by Bernardo Sepulveda, Mexico's Foreign Minister) with his no-holds-barred comments on corruption in the Mexican police force. The ambassador's behavior by then was no longer just a product of his own personal style. Gavin was responding faithfully to the rules of the new era of U.S. international relations.

The traditional divergences between Mexico and the United States in regards to their multi-lateral relations have widened significantly



Gavin with Secretary of State George Schultz. Photo by Renzo Gastoli.

during the past few years of the Reagan administration. Mexico's vote in the United Nations is almost always the opposite of the U.S. vote. And the U.S. commitment to counter-revolutionary forces fighting against Nicaragua is a clear challenge to Mexico's efforts in the Contadora Group. Gavin used all of the means within his reach to communicate his government's disapproval of the Mexican position on this matter.

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Less than a month after having packed his bags and headed off for Los Angeles, Gavin made one more decision, which was really the crowning blow to his years of heavy-handed diplomacy in Mexico. A few days after the U.S. bombing of Libya, the embassy stopped issuing visas to Mexicans who wished to travel to the U.S.

The measure affected an average of one thousand people a day. (The U.S. embassy in Mexico, together with those in London and Manila issue more visas than in any other countries around the world). Gavin defended the decision on the basis of "security concerns" and fear that there might be a Libyan attack against the diplomatic mission. Nonetheless, in other cities where the U.S. embassies would have been more logical targets for Libyan retaliations, no such drastic measures were taken. Once again the ambassador acted in the severest possible way. Today, this is one of the characteristics of the diplomatic relationship that Gavin's possible successor, Charles Pilliod, inherits. ★

Blanche Petrich

