



Wikimedia Commons

From left to right, American journalist Edith O'Shaughnessy, Mexican ambassador to the United States Martha Bárcena Coqui, former United States' Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, and The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa (2016 to date).

Silvia Núñez García*

Notes to Bolster a Future with More Women in Mexico-U.S. Relations

The relationship on a timeline between two sovereign states is often narrated by citing personalities and economic and political events that show up the characteristics and male tone of the links between them.

While Mexico and the United States are not the exception to this rule, their saga covering two centuries includes conflicts, disputes, and even armed clashes, and at the same time episodes of solidarity, cooperation, and good neighborliness that —to be objective about it— end up being highly contrasted.

From this perspective, we can underline the fact that the events in each of the official stories, one Mexican and the other U.S. American, are a testimony to our links, their contradictions, and asymmetries, and confirm a complex proximity, marked by a notable absence of female voices.

This is precisely what motivates me to select rather fleetingly and arbitrarily a few episodes in which women

show up as protagonists of different aspects of these stories. From my particular point of view, I think it is an ethical principle to underline the fact that the relationship between the two countries is not only about governments, but also about connecting our two peoples. For that reason, I will include some figures I consider to be emblematic on one or the other side of the balance sheet and in different periods of that history. My aim is to leave evidence of the female stamp on history and, at the same time to honor the memory of the thousands who from Mexico and the United States have sown friendship and empathy, going beyond the official story.

Two Journalists

I will begin by mentioning journalist and film script writer Edith O'Shaughnessy, the wife of U.S. diplomat Nelson O'Shaughnessy, the business attaché at the U.S. embassy in Mexico. During her stay in our country between 1911 and 1914, Edith became renowned for her prolific writings narrating her experiences during the presidencies of Francisco I. Madero (1911-1913) and Victoriano Huerta (1913-1914).

* Silvia is a researcher at the Center for Research on North America, National Autonomous University of Mexico, and was the center's director from 2009 to 2017; currently, she is the director of the UNAM office in Los Angeles, California; you can contact her at silnugs@gmail.com.

My aim is to leave evidence of the female stamp on history and to honor the memory of the thousands who have sown friendship and empathy, going beyond the official story.

Her passion for Mexican history left us works about the era of the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican Revolution, social life in Mexico City during the empire of Maximilian of Habsburg, and Huerta's implacable rule. Among her most important works are *A Diplomat's Wife in Mexico* (1916) and *Diplomatic Days* (1917), collections of the letters Edith sent her mother.¹

In the 1920s, a second U.S. journalist, Alma Reed, left a profound mark covering the history of the links with Mexico because of her commitment to defending and supporting Mexicans living in poverty in California. Her column, signed "Mrs. Goodfellow," responded to the letters of our compatriots with legal advice, aware of their vulnerability.

Her fame gradually trickled into Mexico, above all when she actively participated in a campaign to stop the imposition of the death penalty on a Mexican teenager in California. She is recognized as a brilliant, progressive woman, an untiring fighter for social justice. Despite not speaking Spanish, she passed into national legend for several reasons: her visit to Mexico on the special invitation of President Álvaro Obregón; her tragic love affair with Yucatán Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who was assassinated;² her passion for the Mayan civilization, and her fascination with Mexican culture.

Alma Reed was awarded the highest honor that the Mexican government can give to a foreigner, the Order of the Aztec Eagle.

The Four Foreign Ministers

Next, we can describe the trajectory of a small group of talented diplomats from Mexico and the United States who have been the foreign ministers of their respective countries, therefore playing an important role in that relationship.

Under the administrations of Ernesto Zedillo in Mexico (1994-2000) and Bill Clinton in the United States (1993-2001), something unprecedented took place in the bilateral relationship and in the political history of both nations:

the very fortunate appointment of two women as heads of their respective countries' foreign policy for the first time in history.

This coincidence allowed for the two women, Mexico's Ambassador Emeritus Rosario Green and the United States' Madeleine K. Albright, to establish a personal relationship, a friendship, that would leave an indelible mark on the terms of bilateral dialogue.

Albright was completely convinced that those moments showed that the ties between the two countries were moving toward a promising future, based on high levels of cooperation and communication. In an address in early 2000, she said that she had met ten times with Green to work on issues of mutual interest: migration, trade, and the fight against drug trafficking.

For Minister Rosario Green, both countries had highly professional delegations, which had a positive effect on the quality of diplomatic dialogue and understanding. Among the issues in her friendly exchange with Albright, she repeatedly mentioned that one of the migratory issues was the growing number of deaths of Mexicans crossing the border through high-risk areas into the United States, as well as the urgent need to limit the violation of Mexican migrant workers' human rights through the use of excessive force by U.S. agents.

Another element united the two women: their enormous experience and appreciation of and commitment to multilateralism. Madeleine Albright had been the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, while Rosario Green occupied the post of general vice-minister for political affairs of that organization from 1994 to 1997.

While Ambassador Green was particularly interested in human rights and the defense of individual liberties, Albright made women's issues a priority in foreign policy, as well as arguing for democracy and warning about the threats of fascism. Both had had the opportunity of being teachers, a privilege that implies the ability to give yourself to others.

Undeniably, these two women have left behind a great legacy for the history of international relations in general, but they are also an example for those who aspire to contribute professionally to the sphere of international affairs, where, fortunately, more and more women from both countries are now participating.

Also outstanding in the history of Mexico-U.S. relations is Hillary Clinton during her tenure as secretary of

State during the Barack Obama administration. One particularly complex episode was her intervention to weaken the monopoly of Pemex, the Mexican state company that controls the oil and gas industry. Clinton promoted a reform that would allow that market to open up to international private companies. The issue came to light during her Democratic presidential campaign in 2015, when the Department of State made public a series of emails that Mrs. Clinton had sent, breaking the institutional rules while corresponding with her closest advisors on a private server. This was one of many elements that weakened her possibilities for victory in the race against Donald Trump.

Hillary Clinton's tenure as secretary of State coincided in 2013 with the period in which Mexico had named Ambassador Patricia Espinosa as minister of Foreign Relations. Both had the responsibility of navigating times of huge challenges for the relationship between the two countries, marked by rising violence in Mexico, drug trafficking, and organized crime.

The Two Ambassadors

In the history of diplomacy between the two countries, it is noteworthy that in the long list of Mexican permanent or interim ambassadors, only one woman has ever been appointed. Martha Bárcena Coqui occupied the position from December 2018 to February 2021, under the current presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Bárcena's prior career is distinguished: she was Mexico's ambassador to Turkey and Denmark, as well as its permanent representative before UN agencies in Rome, among other assignments.

Her stay in Washington coincided with Donald Trump's administration and the renegotiation of the current North American trade agreement, the USMCA. In addition to fostering cooperation between Mexico and the United States, she defended vulnerable migrants, emphasizing the need for both countries to work together to combat racism and hate speech.

The United States was in the same situation, since Roberta Jacobson, ambassador from June 2016 to May 2018, was the only woman ever to occupy the position. Her long career in the State Department is highlighted by her specialization in Latin America, having served previously as the coordinator for Mexican affairs, the coordinator for

Cuban affairs, and as deputy chief of mission in the United States embassy in Peru.

One of the main causes she espouses is the fight against discrimination against women. During her stay in Mexico, she reiterated on several occasions her love of our country, saying that this experience had been the best one of her life.

Final Remarks

In addition to these talented figures, who have left us with valuable contributions to the bicentennial relationship between Mexico and the United States at different times and under different circumstances, it is imperative that we realize that many others have made contributions worthy of admiration from different areas.

A long list of women working in prestigious Mexican universities have contributed as teachers, researchers, and leaders of different institutions committed to educating new generations. These institutions include the UNAM itself, mainly the Center for Research on North America (CISAN); the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM); El Colegio de México; and the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) in Mexico, and, in the United States, the University of Southern California (USC), UCLA, the University of Texas at El Paso, and Arizona State University, among others.

Still other women are committed to the sphere of cross-border activism in favor of vulnerable migrants, participating in emblematic organizations like Mexico's Without Borders and the United States' Women's Refugee Commission.

This is why it must be underlined that the work and unshakable will of all the women committed to the common good of both nations, many of whom do not show up in the media, constitute the biggest potential for fostering a new era in bilateral relations. ■■■

Notes

1 Both originally published by Harper & Brothers (New York and London in 1916 and 1917, respectively) and recently by Burb (2021). [Editor's Note.]

2 It is common knowledge that the famous Mexican song *Peregrina* (words by Yucatecan poet Luis Rosado Vega and music by Ricardo Palmerín) is a testimony to that love story, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGfqMG8Wkgk>. [Editor's Note.]