

Reviews



El águila bicéfala.
Las relaciones México-Estados Unidos a través de la experiencia diplomática
(The Two-Headed Eagle. Mexico-U.S. Relations Through Diplomacy)
Walter Astié-Burgos
Ariel Divulgación, Mexico City, 1995, 425 pp.

A CONFLICTIVE RELATIONSHIP

The relations between Mexico and the United States have often been close and unconditional and sometimes distant and distrustful. A love-hate relationship that goes beyond economics, politics and history, inserting itself into

the hidden corners of the collective unconscious of both peoples.

One of the undeniable merits of Astié-Burgos' book is precisely that it explores the most conflictive aspects of this bilateral relationship dealing with its difficulties critically and—as the direct player he is because of his role as a diplomat—proposing overall, long-term solutions to productive cooperation between both countries.

The author's starting point is the hypothesis that the links between the United States and Mexico have been forged from having “a sort of single physical body,” which implies a great many unbreakable ties: geography, history, economics, population, culture, etc. But simultaneously, he recognizes the existence of forces that have prevented lasting harmony between the two nations. Hence the book's title, which refers to that mythical bird which “although it has one body, has two different heads staring in opposite directions, apparently attempting to avoid or reject total unity.”

Profuse in data and generous in interpretations and proposals, *El águila bicéfala* is written on two methodological levels. On one level, it exhaustively reviews the 200-

year history of Mexico-U.S. relations with the idea that the present can only be explained if we understand the past. The author explains the complexity of a relationship affected by both the interventionist leanings of our neighbor based on the famous Monroe Doctrine and the Manifest Destiny and by Mexico's resistance to losing its sovereignty and assimilation by the superpower.

The second methodological level is a critical look at the relationship with the aim of building what could be called a general theory of Mexico-U.S. relations on the basis of the idea of “interdependence.” The author maintains that in a world which tends to globalization and the formation of regional economic blocs, it is impossible to remain isolated. Therefore, Mexico's foreign policy must take this on board and, for basically geopolitical reasons, seek the best integration possible into North America. In this sense, the transformation of the traditional principles of our foreign policy—sovereignty and self-determination—cannot be put off. The idea is not to renounce them, but to understand that “they stem basically from the need to defend the country's territorial sovereignty from foreign ambitions.” In our time, this is no longer necessary, but we still have to be alert to new, more sophisticated and subtle ways of violating our sovereignty and self-determination.

The change, then, would retain the defense of these basic principles with the awareness that sometimes—as an exercise in our own self-determination, never as a result of external pressure—it is necessary to transfer part of our sovereignty to be able to participate in the global economic tendencies of today's world.

Astié-Burgos dedicates the last chapter of his book to analyzing the origins of the North American Free Trade Agreement and its advantages and disadvantages for the signer countries. His balance sheet is positive: he says NAFTA is the recognition by the Mexican people and government that a harmonious and fruitful relationship with our inevitable main partner is preferable to aspiring to isolated survival in a globalized world. However, he does warn that it is also essential to set up agreements and similar links with other regions to which we are tied for reasons of geography, history and culture: he emphasizes the European Union, the countries of the Pacific Basin and, above all, Latin America.

Relations with the United States are condemned to complexity. According to Astié-Burgos, "Perhaps the very nature of such a close relationship implies difficult, conflictive relations" (p. 414). However, the determination does exist, in part due to the efforts of Mexican diplomacy, to build an atmosphere of productive collaboration. Problems like illegal migra-

tion, drug trafficking, the border, etc., must be looked at from a different point of view, not of mutual recrimination, but of joint collaboration. This will only be possible if mutual respect is cultivated and old, uninformed, often ambiguous, attitudes about each other—not at all representative of the general feelings of either people—are modified in both countries.

This study is important reading because it is well documented and broadens out the vision of the historian. The author's grounding in diplomatic circles—concretely his work as general director for North America of the Foreign Relations Secretariat and alternate Mexican ambassador to the United States—provides the reader with more than an erudite study; it gives us a fresh, first-hand look at the difficult relationship between Mexico and the United States. This is neither the work of a historian nor of a diplomat. It is a synthesis that incorporates both dimensions and achieves a full vision of the past, present and future of our relations with our powerful neighbor. This is a book that will join the ranks of other classic works on the topic like those by Jorge Castañeda, Isidro Favela, Robert A. Pastor, Alan Riding, Lorenzo Meyer and Josefina Zoraida Vázquez.

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Confesiones de Maclovia

(Confessions of Maclovia)

Martín Casillas de Alba

Ediciones del Equilibrista,
Mexico City, 1995, 429 pp.

IN THE LIGHT OF MEMORY

"I went to Chapala because that is where Grandmother Maclovia lived before she died." This is how Martín Casillas de Alba opens his novel *Confesiones de Maclovia* (Confessions of Maclovia), and it is from that phrase that the light of memory—which is invented and intuited, which recreates and investigates—is cast upon us. In the book's "Overture," Martín puts us in a mood appropriate for the journey through the novel's 435 pages: tranquility. A slightly melancholic tranquility. A tranquility of withdrawal and recollection. A re-examination of what has been lived, desired and dreamed.