

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser

A Man Faithful To His Causes

Alejandro Hope Pinson*

Mexico is a country of instant saints. As soon as a public figure dies, everyone discovers his unsuspected virtues and unknown achievements. However, in the case of Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, every bit of praise received in the weeks following his fatal accident is fully justified by his extraordinary life.

Adolfo was my boss for the three years he spent in the Senate and in the ephemeral National Security Advisor's Office for President Fox. During that time, I saw him up close and from far away, at his happy moments and during his gloomy periods. Above everything else, he was a man of strong emotions, although mild tempered. He never lost his composure, but neither was he ever indifferent.

He was more like Don Quixote than he may have liked to admit. His tall, thin figure, his radical untidiness and his apparent physical fragility were the perfect visual complement to the moral *gravitas* he radiated. Almost without exception, he chose the most difficult causes, the rockiest roads, the most impregnable of walls. In the 1980s, he took on the defense of the Guatemalan refugees and paid for his daring with a kidnapping that lasted several hours. In the 1990s, he dared to defend Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas amidst the Salinas administration's persecution, and then criticize him, winning for himself the permanent hostility of Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) members.

In Congress, Adolfo always swam against the current. In an institution dominated by party bureaucracies, it was not easy to maintain his independence and a critical spirit. However, he managed to carve out a space for himself and invent new ways of doing politics. With only his voice and his intelligence as weapons, he was decisive in more than one legislative debate: against the ferocious opposition of the government and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), he created the Conasupo Investigating Commission; he forged a consensus about the need to evaluate NAFTA; and he made himself indispensable in foreign policy discussions.

Perhaps the most audacious position of his political career was coming out in favor of Vicente Fox's candidacy early on. As early as 1995, he aided in building the conditions and arguments that facilitated the construction of the vast Fox coalition. Without Adolfo, the strategy of the "useful vote" (or "making my vote count"), so effective in the 2000 campaign, would be incomprehensible. It did not come without a price: many —among them, some who today praise him— accused him of treason and opportunism, vanity and aspirations to power.

None of that could be farther from the truth. Adolfo was faithful to his causes, not to institutional names. His idealism was never in conflict with effectiveness. His support for Fox had the same source as his support for Cárdenas: loyalty to the democratic cause, to the imperious need to throw the PRI out of Los Pinos, of breathing fresh air into the political scene, of fighting corruption.

Was Adolfo disappointed by Fox? Undoubtedly. But the process was gradual and I have the impression he always hoped that Fox would recover his initial impetus for change. And nevertheless, there was more than one reason for an early disillusionment. His time in the executive branch was very hard: his moral constitution made him very bad at bureaucratic infighting. He was not a master of intrigue; he was no betrayer; he did not deliver low blows; he was frank, direct and reliable, all qualities that made it difficult for him to manoeuvre in the palace-like atmosphere that arose around Fox as soon as he took office. Minister of the Interior Santiago Creel took it upon himself to make his life impossible, and Adolfo did not find in Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda the ally he expected. It was a very lonely year.

In many senses, Adolfo was reborn when he was named ambassador to the United Nations. Suddenly, he was once again in a parliamentary setting, the champion of a just cause, speaking firmly and directly. The debate about the war in Iraq brought out the best Adolfo, the permanent insurgent, the enemy of those in power. It was the natural extension of his fight for democracy in Mexico, the perfect pinnacle of a long career as a rebel.

* Consultant with the GEA Group of Economists and Associates.

The circumstances of his resignation from the embassy in New York were the patent demonstration of the abyss that already separated him from the Fox project. To the incontrovertible reality of the U.S. perception of Mexico as its back yard, Fox responded with evasions and false indignation. To Adolfo's memorable letter of resignation, he responded with the silence of the tomb. Perhaps because by that time, they had very little to say to each other.

I am not certain, but I believe that the return to the desert of the opposition must have been both bitter and liberating for Adolfo. Bitter because he had spent time, effort and political capital on an administration that did not deserve it: he had to start again, without clear allies and with many doors closed to him. Liberating, because Adolfo had the soul of an oppositionist: he fed on the fight against those in power, on denouncing the tyrannical, on fair fights and on free speech, on everything he could not have when he was an administration official and representative.

His death came at the worst possible moment, just when he was rebuilding his life, when he was about to once again become the imperious, exhilarating dissident of his best years. I do not know what he would have done with his newly recovered freedom, but I am convinced that he still had a lot of aces up his sleeve. Perhaps he would have gone back to Congress or written a book or headed up some citizens' campaign. Undoubtedly, these and many other possibilities flew around his permanently animated brain.

To honor Adolfo, only one thing comes to mind: to continue the struggle. To write the books he left unwritten, join the fights he would have carried out, argue for the causes he would have defended.

I completely lack his charisma and his creativity, his energy and his intelligence. I only have some of his passion: he infected me with it as my boss and as a friend, as a public figure and as a private man. It is my inheritance and I promise to make good use of it.

Experiences With Adolfo Aguilar Zinser

Cassio Luiselli Fernández*

I met Adolfo Aguilar almost 30 years ago at Harvard University. A dear mutual friend, Eugenio Anguiano Roch, introduced us. We were attending a boring, ceremonious seminar about Mexico-U.S. relations. Happily, we soon found it more interesting and pleasant to chat amongst ourselves and make jokes about the gratuitous solemnity of the lecturers, then all very much older than ourselves. We visited bookstores and took long walks through the campus. It was the birth of a close friendship that enormously enriched my life and which I continue to be thankful for.

His overwhelming eloquence and charm, his wit and intelligence made his company a pleasure, a challenge, but

above all a great reason for joy. I remember our rambles, still young and unconcerned, our journeys together and innumerable academic and political events. I remember, of course, the discussions about where Mexico was going, but also the unending laughter and shared joy of living. Very often Adolfo and I did not agree, but between us there was never any lack of respect or dialogue, much less good humor. There was something of the Don Quixote in Adolfo, and I very often told him so. His walk and his slender, rather lean physique, but above his way of fighting and "cutting through entanglements"¹ made them seem more and more alike with the passing of the years.

Our friendship was nourished not only by politics, travel and the intellect; we also shared our taste for being fathers and for our families. Our children Valeria and Adolfo, Jr., spend

* Professor at the Monterrey Technological Institute of Higher Learning (ITESM).