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## The Bicentennial Of Mexico-U.S. Relations

For some reason, anniversaries make human beings think differently. The bicentennial of relations between Mexico and the United States offers an opportunity not only to celebrate—something that Ambassador Ken Salazar has announced for December 2022—, but also to reassess this historical process on three levels. The first is how we see the United States and what we have learned from it in these two centuries. The second is how they see us and what we have learned from the Mexican-U.S. narrative about Mexico’s reality. The third is how bilateral relations have changed.

Let me start with the last one. To understand this long process, I want to refer to the extraordinary book com-

plied by Terrazas, Riguzzi, De los Ríos, and Gurza about the history of bilateral relations.<sup>1</sup> It is an essential encyclopedic work that offers an exhaustive, detailed outlook on this historical process.

The two empires of the Atlantic world, the Spanish and the English, were born, developed, and concluded in absolutely different ways, as John Elliot has explained in one of the most important books of history to be published in recent years.<sup>2</sup> In their more than three centuries of existence, New Spain and New England did not develop synchronically. New Spain had existed for a long time when the English founded their first settlements and projected a false image abroad. In New England, it was believed that Cortez’s conquest had been an enormous economic success and it was presumed that Mexico was a kind of horn of plenty. That is one of the most powerful myths propagated about Mexico since then, and it was what

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led many U.S. Americans to conceive of the conquest of Mexico as a reference point. The fascination that the conquest of Mexico held for U.S. Americans is noteworthy, to the point that, many centuries later, when their armies entered Mexico in the nineteenth century, they carried under their arms William H. Prescott's book about the history of the Conquest.

In the twilight of British colonial domination in the Americas, a territorial redefinition of its sphere of influence intensified, and from the second half of the eighteenth century on, the advance of the colonists and the projects of the U.S. "proto-nation" began to grow with a voracious religious and political expansionism that would end by cutting off New Spain's viceregal legacy in the newly founded Mexican republic.

At least from the time of the Onís/Adams Treaty in 1819, the issue of U.S. expansion is an irritant in relations between the two republics. While relations were erratic during the colonial period, the new republics did not emerge on the basis of equality. The relationship was never symmetrical, much less based on trust or mutual respect, even though they called us a "sister republic." The old prejudices that the English had fostered about the Spanish were transferred to the new continent.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the U.S. colonists' racism against Afro-descendants and the indigenous populations increased in the case of Mexico, a nation that merged the two traditions in its lineage.

We were the children of Spanish obscurantism, of the Inquisition. The Pope and all the elements that made up the accursed Spanish legend, plus the indigenous past and Mexico's inability to create its own solid institutions came together. With profound disdain for the country's first steps, the first U.S. ambassador, Joel R. Poinsett, said that the lack of means for acquiring knowledge and the lack of stimuli for that effort coincided to make Mexicans a people more ignorant and libertine than their ancestors had been.<sup>4</sup>

We were, from his arrogant perspective, a combination of the bad and the worst. The nineteenth century saw the

maturity of the United States as a great power, once it got over its Civil War and consolidated its continental territory to Mexico's detriment, projecting itself as a global power. The territorial problems, however, did not end with the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty, which ended the U.S. occupation. It is interesting to follow the variations and regularities during the arc of these 200 years. The issue of territorial boundaries and management of the common border became a headache for the different administrations throughout the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, territorial expansionism became outdated and relations took on a new feel. The management of the common border was the most important issue, but for Mexico, the crucial point was to ensure an equilibrium such that both countries remained on their own tracks. One strategic line of thinking is how to maintain the proximity and simultaneous distance that would allow the country to develop its own project without breaking with the United States. We have never totally agreed with them, although we fought shoulder to shoulder in World War II, but we did not want to accompany them in their incursions into Korea and we loudly decried their policy in Latin America. This way, the model of "distant" but pragmatic neighbors consolidated. Two countries that decided what they had to resolve without fanfare or enthusiasm, taking care that the differences always remained on a level that were politically manageable.

As Mexico saw the end of its internally-centered development model, a period of domestic decomposition began, which saw, among other things, an increase in the power of the criminal organizations that exported drugs to the United States, an insatiable growing market. At the same time that the U.S. government demonizes drug consumption, it also fosters it with all manner of stimuli, leading to a kind of narcotization of the agenda and situating Mexico as a state that practically protects criminals.

From the 1980s until now, we have experienced a great deal of bilateral tension due to the criminals' violence and power: today, the matter continues to be open. But we have also moved from the paradigm of distant neighbors to what Shannon O'Neil called "indivisible nations,"<sup>5</sup> that is, the commonality of interests that the future poses. Despite the parenthesis represented by Trump, which made a powerful narrative of anti-Mexicanism and the stalking and demolition of NAFTA, Mexico and the United States are strategic partners that share an economic, demographic,

and security space with ever-increasing interactions. At bottom, they also share the same strategic vision of the region in the face of the powerful Asian economies.

We are, then, neighbors condemned to understand one another. Beyond pointing out the small differences, this bicentennial should lead us to clarify how many things we share today and how many more we will share in the near future. When you look at the Hispanic caucus, the presence of Latinos is growing in the great power's political decisions. And, as Tonatiuh Guillén has pointed out, the Mexican nation has re-defined itself to recognize that today, many millions of its co-nationals live in the United States and are U.S. citizens, but at the same time Mexicans.<sup>6</sup> In the coming years, this will increase drastically, and it is probable that, despite medium-term political events, the convergence will re-define the kind of bilateral relationship we have had until now.

The question that this kind of retrospective view puts before the two countries continues to be valid. Each will use it for its own ends. It is interesting to return to the reflections of Paul Johnson, the author of one of the most beautiful histories of the United States,<sup>7</sup> about what would have been the effect on the forging of the U.S. American character and way of seeing the world if on its southern border there had been a structured country with the ability to limit its neighbor's arrogant expansionism and poisonous idea of extending slavery as a mechanism for capital accumulation. Mexico was never capable of slowing those aspirations and the colossus of the North was able to advance territorially, but it was its own domestic contradictions and bloody Civil War that slowed the expansion of slavery.

The other point is what we have achieved in two centuries. After 200 years, the United States went from being a series of colonies discussing whether to create a unified government, to being the world's foremost power and seeing its old metropolis as an important, but clearly subordinate, ally. Mexico has also changed a great deal, but

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after 200 years, its official discourse continues to perceive the weight of the colonial period and to have an inferiority complex vis-à-vis Spain that it has not been able to overcome. In 200 years, our neighbors created an arrogant, glitzy powerhouse, and here, we continue to tell the story of a nation that was sacked and the victim of the worst kind of plunder that humanity has ever seen.

The U.S. view of Mexico has been ambivalent. Valuable collections of stories by writers and travelers offer a contrasting palette. Some describe an untrustworthy, disorderly, dirty country; others have found—or known how to discover—the cultural grandeur that this country hides and the glorious past that allows it to show not only pride of belonging, but also show its archaeological areas and colonial cities as its best feature. In this country, in 200 years, many things have been done, but none on the scale that impresses its neighbors. Perhaps there has been a will to understand its own circumstances, but it is the splendor and decline of the Maya and all the pre-Hispanic civilizations, as well as the viceregal period, that continues to project Mexico's grandeur. Mesoamerica outshines the U.S. Southwest and the plains of the North, and New Spain eclipse all the civil and religious buildings of New England.

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**1** Marcela Terrazas, Paolo Riguzzi, Gerardo Gurza, and Patricia de los Ríos, *Las relaciones México-Estados Unidos, 1756-2010*, vols. I-II (Mexico City: UNAM, 2012).

**2** John Elliott, *Imperios del mundo atlántico: España y Gran Bretaña en América (1492-1830)* (Madrid: Taurus, 2006).

**3** Richard Morse, *El espejo de Próspero. Un estudio de la dialéctica del nuevo mundo* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1982).

**4** Quoted by Ana Rosa Suárez Argüello, "Joel R. Poinsett. La intromisión en los asuntos mexicanos," in Roberta Lajous, Paolo Riguzzi, Celia Toro, and Erika Pani, *Embajadores de México en Estados Unidos: diplomacia de crisis y oportunidades* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México y Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2021).

**5** Shannon O'Neil, *Dos naciones indivisibles. México, Estados Unidos y el camino por venir* (Mexico City: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2014).

**6** Tonatiuh Guillén, *México, nación transterritorial: el desafío del siglo XXI* (Mexico City: PUEB, UNAM, 2021).

**7** Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (Glasgow: Harper Collins U. K. Publishers, Ltd., 1997).