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Presidents William Clinton and Ernesto Zedillo.

# Mexico and the United States At the End of the Twentieth Century

## Between Fear and Hope

(Part Two)

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### INTRODUCTION

In part one of this article, I presented an overview of Mexico-U.S. relations, comparing the advances of today's bilateral relations with the beginning of the last century. However, while the creation of institutions and instruments for cooperation has strengthened the relationship, fears of destabilization and social unrest in Mexico continue to concern U.S. analysts, just as they did almost a hundred years ago. I also looked at the economic context, particularly in light of the changes

that NAFTA has brought: while trade has significantly increased, Mexicans' living standards have not improved sufficiently, and, therefore, migration, a determining factor in our bilateral relations, continues to mount.

### THE BILATERAL AGENDA

Today, the main issues on the bilateral agenda are drug trafficking, trade, Mexican migration to the United States, oil, the environment and border relations. These points take up most of the attention of both countries' government offi-

cials, although there are other topics to be discussed bilaterally, like tourism, education and culture.

Relations between our societies are not reduced to what our governments discuss bilaterally, however. Today, contracts and negotiations between Mexican and U.S. businessmen play a larger role than they did in the past, as do relations between academics and students and between nongovernmental organizations. A new element has also emerged: the growing presence of Mexicans and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent in the economic and political processes on both sides of the border.

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The population of Mexican origin in the United States has grown from 358,000 in 1910 to more than 18 million in 1996, a jump from 0.4 percent to 6.8 percent of the total population. This is due both to the birth rate of Mexicans residing in the United States, which is 35 to 40 percent higher than that of Anglos, and to the continual migration of Mexicans to the north. The same factors are expected to sustain the growth of the population of Mexican origin in the next century, and estimates put the increase from 18 million in 1996 to 48.018 million in 2040 if the proportion of Mexicans in the U.S. population remains constant, or to 54.031 million if it continues to grow by 1.5 percent a decade.<sup>1</sup> This kind of growth has implications for the labor market, the educational system, political life and the culture of the United States. It will also have important consequences for Mexico with regard to its population, the volume of migration to the north, the sending of remittances to Mexico, the export of Mexican products to the United States, the job Mexican consulates and other diplomatic missions have to do in the U.S., the activities of Mexican political parties in the U.S. and the economic support that political activities in Mexico could get from Mexicans in the U.S. All this will mean that in bilateral affairs, migration continues to be central.

THE CHALLENGES OF  
INEQUALITY AND CHANGE

As I have already mentioned, Mexico's economic and political advances depend on old, still-unsolved problems. For exam-

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ple, according to a study by Mexico's National Population Council (Conapo), 80 percent of Mexican families saw their real income drop over the last two decades, while the remaining 20 percent continued in the same precarious situation they had in 1977. Therefore, "what Mexican households faced from 1977 to 1996 was a combination of growing poverty and ten years of increasing inequality from 1984 to 1994 ... [Therefore,] these households' real income is lower in 1996 than it was in 1977."<sup>2</sup> This clearly indicates that the poverty and inequality that have traditionally plagued Mexico not only have not been abolished, but have increased. Thus, although some of Mexico's social and economic groups have advanced, a large part of Mexican society has either stood still or retreated in this sphere, presenting important challenges both for the future viability of economic policies and for relations with the United States.<sup>3</sup> In this vein, as the general secretary of Conapo said, "if the [Mexican] economy does not firmly move ahead in its ability to create sufficient job opportunities in adequately paid

positions, there will be substantial migration of workers to the United States."<sup>4</sup> U.S. society has traditionally been concerned about uncontrolled Mexican migration. In addition, some sectors are very disturbed now about the possibility of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) no longer controlling the country and the great instability or even civil war they perceive to be a possible result. In this sense, U.S. supporters of greater democratization in Mexico are inevitably trapped between being convinced of the need to continue to do so and the fear of change and the instability that the process could bring about. This could even lead to retreating or canceling out the advances that have been made with regard to other issues in bilateral relations. There are, then, important dangers given what is still Mexico's immature democratic culture, the ample tolerance for illegality and the problems of unsatisfactory operation of law enforcement, the administration of justice and security, which would not automatically be solved simply by a change in the party which politically controls the country.<sup>5</sup> However, there is also the hope that recent economic and political changes in Mexico are an important counterweight to the destabilizing forces that may emerge in the future.

What seems clear is that, regardless of which party or parties win Mexico's presidency and Congress in the year 2000, the economic policies put into effect when they come into office in December 2000 will have to include more than just the fight against inflation to counter the profound inequalities that plague Mexican society today. The type of actions taken will determine whether there will be a greater or lesser effect on the country's

political economy, which could in turn have an impact on the links to the United States.

As a result, it is to be expected that relations between Mexico and the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be marked more by change than by the status quo. Change will continue to be inevitable, both as a result of the dynamic of the bilateral link itself and of the transformations in the world that are having an impact on them. Mexico's domestic problems, the changes in the United States and bilateral relations cannot help but be affected by the global transition toward a new civilization characterized mainly by the preeminence of knowledge, communi-

cations, interconnections and mergers.<sup>6</sup> However, the great challenge that both countries will face—particularly Mexico—will be to ensure that the division of their inhabitants into two groups (those who benefit from global transformations and those who have not managed to link up to or have even been hurt by them) does not produce violence, destruction or chaos. **MM**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Figures were taken from Jennifer E. Glick and Jennifer van Hook, "The Mexican-origin Population of the United States in the Twentieth Century," in Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, *Migration between Mexico and the United States Binational Study/Estudio Binacional México-Estados Unidos sobre Migración*. Research Reports and Background Materials vol. 2 (Austin: Morgan Printing, 1998), pp. 571-586.

<sup>2</sup> Consejo Nacional de Población, "El ingreso de los hogares de México. Una visión de dos décadas," *La situación demográfica de México* (Mexico City: Conapo, 1999) pp. 151-160.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, disquieting statements have been made by the vice president of Strategy Research Corporation, who said that no more than 15 percent of the 118 million households in Latin America can afford the kind of consumer products that U.S. companies associate with a middle class existence. In addition, he said that in Mexico, "the growth of the middle class has practically ceased." *Latin Trade* (August 1999), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> See the article about the Fourth Report on the Advances of the 1995-2000 National Population Program in *Reforma* (Mexico City), 11 July 1999, p. 17A.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of Mexican society's current political problems, see the articles by Carlos Castillo Peraza and Héctor Aguilar Camín in *Nexos* (March 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Erla Zwingle, "Un mundo unido," *National Geographic* (August 1999), pp. 6-33.

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