

This was doubtless his goal.

The climate that he created in the bilateral relationship inexorably poisoned good will. This was seen clearly in the visit of Fidel Castro to a major international conference held in Monterrey. In a telephone conversation Fox asked Castro to leave early in order to avoid any chance of his being in the same room as President George W. Bush. Piqued, Castro released the taped conversation several months later in a large press conference after the Mexican president denied claims by Castro that he had been asked to leave. Regardless of the proprieties of releasing details of a confidential conversation, it revealed clearly how Fox was prepared to embarrass Castro in order to accommodate Bush—and too that Castro was prepared to forego deeply established diplomatic traditions by revealing such intimate details. There was clearly no love lost between the two governments, and rupture stared them both in the face. In 2002 Cuba and Mexico were within a few days of ending a diplomatic relationship that had lasted for a century—a decision which would have been serious indeed for both of them.

As low as this relationship had fallen, even worse was yet to come—in May of 2004. The three weeks between the vote in Geneva (where Mexico voted—for the third time in a row—against Cuba following a phone call from the U.S. president to his Mexican counterpart) and May 2 (when Mexico recalled its ambassador from Havana, gave her Cuban counterpart in Mexico City 48 hours to leave and expelled a second Cuban diplomat) were tempestuous indeed. Rhetoric reached a fever pitch at the beginning of May, with Fidel Castro accusing President Fox of destroying Mexico's international prestige through its blatant support of Washington's goals, while Fox used the May 5 national holiday to lambast “offenses to the dignity of Mexico”.

This deliberate downgrading of relations by the Fox government in May 2004 is the low point of this sexenio, and is totally out of character for the bilateral relationship. In part this is due to profound ideological differences between the two governments, and to the base prepared by Castañeda. Also important, however, is the apparent attempt by the Fox administration to link the Cubans to the promising candidacy of Mexico City mayor, and leading contender for the Mexican presidency, López Obrador. (Clearly the objective by the Fox administration was to cast doubt on the character of the PRD leader through a series of videotapes that incriminated his associates. The key figure in this shady operation was Carlos Ahumada, who provided the videotapes in question, and then headed to Cuba. For their part, the Cuban authorities returned Ahumada and two of his associates to Mexico).

While there may well be further crises during the remainder of the Fox term, the observation of Fidel Castro in 2002—following the diplomatic debacle in Monterrey is pertinent: “Diplomatic relations might indeed be broken because of these facts that we have outlined—but the fraternal and historical ties between the people of Mexico and Cuba will be eternal.” Even allowing for political rhetoric, it is clear that the profound ties (cultural, economic and indeed political) will survive this profound crisis.