

Successes and Failures in the Mexico-Cuba Relationship

The fundamental objective of a nation's foreign policy is to protect and develop the essential goals of that nation. The case of Mexico's approach to the "Cuban question" is instructive, because we can see precisely how different approaches have worked—and have not worked. Obviously there are many variables at play, many different international contexts, and many different national agendas pursued by various administrations. Nevertheless some valid general conclusions can be drawn.

It is obvious that the spirit of nationalism still permeates Mexican national public life, and is alive and well at least in political discourse. This has been channelled effectively by several Mexican presidents, who have used this deeply rooted interest in nation-building to solidify their presidencies. (It has also been manipulated in order to justify their own strong-arm, and often corrupt, political practices). Flag-waving is endemic in politics—as can be witnessed in the annual celebration of the "grito de Dolores" celebration in which the president commemorates from the balcony of the presidential palace in the Zócalo the anniversary of the movement for independence in 1810. Appeals to nationalism are common in most countries. The Mexicans, however, carry it to an extraordinary degree.

In the Mexican context, closely related with the issue of nationalism is the question of the revolutionary roots of the political system. Anybody who has analyzed the speeches given by Mexican politicians (the Fox presidency being an exception) cannot help but be aware of the consistent injection of claims that politicians are living up to the revolutionary aspirations of nearly a century ago. Even when it is clear that the socio-political reality of contemporary Mexico is extraordinarily unjust—and in many ways beckons a radical new uprising—politicians continue to invoke the memory of revolutionary goals and aspirations. Schoolchildren are socialized into accepting this history as sacrosanct, and "la Revolución" is firmly imbedded in the national psyche.

The reverse of this coin is that those presidencies which ignore the nationalist issue do so at their peril. And of course those who are seen as spurning the nationalist—and revolutionary—tradition are even more likely to create obstacles for themselves. The case of Luis Echeverría is a good example of a president who played the nationalist card effectively, whereas Vicente Fox has in general done a poor job, looking extremely weak in the face of U.S. designs (notwithstanding Mexico's courageous decision over Iraq)—and turning his back on both the inbred nationalism of his fellow citizens and the deeply-rooted ties with revolutionary Cuba. (His indecision at the Monterrey conference, his clear subordination of the conference to meet the goals of the United States, and his cavalier treatment of the wily Cuban president—using the informal "tú" form while Fidel Castro adopts the mantle of senior statesman—have all played against him, and he lost substantial credibility. The fact that Foreign Affairs Minister Castañeda would later be caught coldly in a naked lie when asked if Fox had pressured Castro to leave early so as to appease the demands of the U.S. president only added fuel to the fire, and made the government look inept and humiliated).