

FROM HIGH HOPES TO DISENCHANTMENT

In one of their last meetings, in November of last year, Colin Powell and then-Secretary of Foreign Relations Jorge Castaneda bantered easily and publicly while seriously discussing one of the thorniest issues in the modern U.S.-Mexico relationship. “Water, water, water...” said Powell. “Agua, agua, agua...” answered Castaneda. Both were referring to a Mexican failure to comply with water delivery commitments, an issue that had become political fodder for local politicians on both sides of the border. Secretary Powell and Secretary Castaneda were aware of the political ramifications, but also understood that both sides of the Rio Bravo region share an ecosystem, and that both the Mexican and American sides had felt the effects of the recent drought.

Castaneda and Powell were able to defuse the problem. Their interaction showed how far they had come in an occasionally uneasy personal relationship, and how far these two countries, with a historical mistrust of each other, had progressed. But it also reflected Powell’s and Castaneda’s own limitations and constraints. For Secretary Powell, the same difficulties he faces in trying to set “moderate” policies in a hawkish administration hinder or even impede him from taking a leading role in bilateral relations. For Castaneda, attempting to honor his government’s priority commitment to upgrading the Mexico-U.S. bilateral tie in the face of shifting U.S. foreign policy preoc-

cupations was a frustration and, in the end, one of the main reasons for his resignation.

Prickly But Pragmatic

“That relationship [between Secretary Powell and Secretary Castaneda] was an asset, both in times of collaboration as well as in moments of disagreement,” a source close to Castaneda has been quoted as saying. “There has never been a relation so close between a secretary of State and a secretary of foreign relations,” he added. At the same time, some U.S. sources claim that the relationship between Powell and Castaneda was not as good as it appeared, and that sometimes the secretary answered Castaneda’s calls only “reluctantly.”

Perhaps both claims are true, accurately reflecting the complexity of the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

But, as Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, an expert in U.S.-Mexico relations at the Center for Strategic International Studies in Washington, points out: “Whatever their relationship was, like their governments, they realized that they did not and do not have any choice but to have good relations at their level.” The U.S.-Mexico relationship is vitally important to both nations economically as well as culturally. For the U.S., the 2,000-mile border is an important security concern. More than 80 percent of Mexico’s exports — or one quarter of the country’s GDP — go to the U.S., and Mexico is America’s



AFTER PLANS TO UPGRADE
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By JOSE CARRENO

third largest export market for agricultural products. As of 2000, Mexico was the world's fifth largest oil exporter, and American's fourth largest supplier.

As good as the U.S.-Mexico relationship might sometimes appear, however, it remains prickly, even difficult, due to a host of local issues and quite a few international disagreements, even while the bottom line is one of collaboration. Both sides have come to realize that theirs is a classic "inter-mestic relationship," one in which domestic issues have an impact on foreign relations and vice versa. The relationship is rooted in a pragmatic policy shaped over many years, to not allow specific problems to "contaminate" ties — essentially, an agreement to disagree.

The U.S.-Mexico relationship today is the result of an evolutionary process of social and economic change: increased Mexican immigration to the U.S. following the Mexican economic crises in the 1980s, the large — more than a half million — American expatriate community in Mexico and, in 2001, the arguably overplayed friendship between President Bush and the newly-elected Mexican president, Vicente Fox, who entered office fresh from an astounding electoral victory that changed the face of Mexican politics.

Overplayed or not, the fast developing friendship between Fox and Bush, and the unprecedented initial prominence of the Mexican relationship in the Bush administration's agenda, became simultaneously a stimulus and a challenge for the two secretaries of foreign affairs.

Educated in the Cold War climate and oriented to an east-west rivalry in geopolitical and military terms that more often than not was linked to the Middle East and Eastern Europe rather than to U.S. borders, Secretary Powell never appeared to have been a player in the relations between Mexico and the United States. But his previous positions, as National Security Adviser and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, showed us a man fast to learn and adept at playing the political game. These characteristics helped him to seize the moment when, as a newly minted secretary of State, he found out that his president, George W. Bush, had only one card to play when talking about foreign relations: Mexico.

Jose Carreno is the Washington correspondent for El Universal of Mexico.

His counterpart Jorge Castaneda, scion of a prominent diplomatic family in Mexico and a brilliant academic, with a profound knowledge of American politics and a penchant for media manipulation, hoped to change the reactive — sometimes even passive — character of Mexico's traditional foreign policy for a more proactive approach, where Mexico would take the initiative vis-à-vis the U.S. His frequent bickering with reporters, accusations of arrogance, the animosity of a left that felt betrayed and the very visible problems in his personal life, however, troubled Castaneda's proposals from the outset.

A Severe Blow

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, instead of moving the U.S.-Mexico relationship to a higher plane, Powell and Castaneda found themselves managing the fallout as the giddy days of high hopes gave way to disenchantment. The Bush administration's preoccupation with the war on terrorism drove U.S. relations with Mexico off the stage, and doomed the much-hoped-for agreement on immigration that would have resulted in legalization for some 3.5 million undocumented Mexicans resident in the U.S. — an issue of great economic, political and even human rights significance in Mexico, where U.S. immigration policies are held responsible for hundreds of deaths on the border.

"Powell was well intentioned, mostly because he understood that President Bush wanted a special relationship. However, after Sept. 11, his priorities and those of the U.S. government changed, as Mexico and the whole of Latin America were diminished," says Andres Rozental, former Mexican under secretary of foreign relations and current chairman of the Mexican Council for International Relations.

For Mexico this was a severe blow. When George W. Bush became president he promised a new relationship with Mexico and for a few months it appeared he was serious, thanks to the "discovery" of the potential Latino political power and the increased economic and social relations between both countries. Many Mexicans believed in the idea of a new special relationship and the possibility of "legalization."

When Mexico joined the U.N. Security Council in 2002, it made a bold move to project the image of a democratic government committed to a new interna-

tionalist agenda, but to a great degree this was based on the need to redefine the relationship with the United States, a looming presence in Mexico. At first the U.S. seemed to expect a new ally on a host of issues. Some of those hopes were justified, as a change in the Mexican policy toward human rights in Cuba occurred. But, as in other countries, the sympathy created in Mexico in reaction to the events of Sept. 11 did not carry over to support for a war or for unilateral U.S. intervention in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Other bilateral issues helped cool the relationship between Fox and Bush. In August 2002 the Mexican government asked the Texas state government to at least postpone the execution of Javier Suarez Medina, condemned to death for the murder of an American policeman — whose case gained international prominence because, as in other cases, the Texas authorities had failed to comply with the Vienna Convention on Consular Rights. The execution was scheduled to take place only days before a Fox visit to Bush in Texas. Mexico does not have a death penalty and campaigns actively internationally against it. When Texas Governor Rick Perry, who was in the middle of an electoral campaign, ignored the Mexican request, President Fox was forced to cancel his visit.

Months after the lack of agreement on a new immigration policy, the cooling in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico was underlined by what was described as the “visibly sullen” attitude of President Bush at the end of a bilateral meeting with Fox last November in Los Cabos, in Mexico.

Still Talking

Indeed, Secretary Powell has had to navigate against the tide. He has repeated time and again, whenever asked or speaking in an international forum, about how important Mexico is for the U.S. The Mexicans like to hear that, and would like to believe it, but many claim that the speeches and the facts do not correspond.

Despite the obviously weakening state of the rela-

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tionship, Powell and Castaneda continued to speak frequently by phone, exchanging views and advice on issues that went from the water problems along the common border to Iraq and Venezuela, from Argentina to Afghanistan, and to longstanding differences between both countries, such as on the legalities and circumstances that may have helped Mexican nationals avoid the death sentence in the U.S.

The limits to that close relationship, however, were seen in a series of Mexican decisions.

Though recognizing the American right of response, Mexico refused to back unilateral American military operations in Afghanistan, and remains very cautious about accepting the idea of granting any country the right of unilateral action. Mexico refused to support the American tendency to unilateralism in Iraq in the U.N. Security Council, when last November it was an active participant in the effort to water down an American-sponsored resolution about inspections in Iraq. And, on Jan. 9, 2003, Mexico filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice concerning the legal circumstances surrounding death sentences against 51 Mexicans in the U.S.

Finally, in early January, Jorge Castaneda abruptly resigned. Secretary Powell and Mr. Castaneda had been in contact by telephone on Jan. 7, and even though everybody knew that Castaneda had presented his resignation and that President Fox was “considering” it, the subject was not broached. Two days later Castaneda called again but minutes later, when Powell was able to return the call, Castaneda was already “indisposed.” His resignation had been accepted.

Colin Powell is now on the telephone with Luis Ernesto Derbez, the new Mexican Secretary for Foreign Relations, and is again stressing the importance of Mexico for the United States and conveying his hopes for a productive relationship with Derbez. He may be able to convince the Mexicans and Derbez ... but will he ever convince the Americans? ■