

Wariness on Both Sides

Mexico-Chicano Political Dialogue Fades

By JUAN M. VASQUEZ, *Times Staff Writer*

MEXICO CITY—The moment was historic. For the first time, a descendant of Mexicans who had emigrated north in search of a better life was returning to the land of his forebears not as a tourist, but as the ambassador of the United States.

The newly appointed envoy was Julian Nava of Los Angeles, former history professor and school board member in Los Angeles and one of the best-known Mexican-American leaders in California.

But when the 53-year-old Nava arrived for his first official meeting with Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's top diplomat, a curious thing happened.

"When I first walked into his office, he began speaking to me in English," Nava recalled. "I said to myself, 'well, darn it, I can speak to him in perfectly fluent Spanish, and I'm going to do it.'"

Nava spoke his ancestral lan-

guage well and he knew that Castañeda was aware of this. But the Mexican diplomat continued to speak in English.

"We went on a while that way," Nava continued. "The Mexican foreign minister spoke to me in English

ter's way of reminding Nava that, despite his fluency in Spanish and his Mexican ancestry, he was still just another Yankee ambassador.

Perhaps it was a sly game of one-upmanship, with each diplomat determined to show his mastery of the other's language.

Or maybe it was an unconscious display of the condescension that some Mexicans express toward the descendants of those who, decades ago, "abandoned" Mexico for the United States.

It could even be a combination of the three. But whatever the case, the incident illustrates the complicated and sometimes suspicious relationship that exists between the Mexicans and the millions of Mexican descendants in the United States.

The relationship has improved in the last dozen years, thanks in large part to discussions between Chicano

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LATINOS

Another in a series of special reports on Latinos in Southern California.

and I, the U.S. ambassador, spoke to him in Spanish. Can you imagine that? Finally, after 15 minutes or so, he began to speak Spanish to me."

Eventually, the two men developed an amicable relationship. But the discomfiture of that first meeting in mid-1980 still rankles Nava.

Perhaps it was the foreign minis-

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leaders and a few influential officials in Mexico. Some who took part in the talks even flirted with the notion of forming a Chicano pressure group modeled on the Jewish lobby for Israel, in return for Mexico's support on Chicano issues.

But that never happened and a study of the so-called "Mexico-Chicano Dialogue" and interviews with many of the key participants shows there is a long way to go before the establishment of a closer political relationship.

Many believe it will never occur. According to this view, there is simply no widespread sympathy in the Mexican-American community for greater political ties with Mexico.

"Culturally, Chicanos are very proud of their Mexican heritage. But what does that mean politically? I don't think it means much," argued Rodolfo O. de la Garza, a professor at the University of Texas who has written several articles on the subject.

A more enthusiastic viewpoint was offered by Chicano activist Jose Angel Gutierrez, whose early contacts with former Mexican President Luis Echeverria blossomed into what both sides now call "*el dialogo*."

"This has helped to legitimize the Chicano leadership in the United States and, even more importantly, Chicano issues," Gutierrez said in a telephone interview from his office at Western Oregon State College.

There is virtually no one in the Mexican government publicly ad-



RICK CORRALES / Los Angeles Times

Julian Nava

'The Mexican foreign minister spoke to me in English and I, the U.S. ambassador, spoke to him in Spanish. Can you imagine that?'

effect on Mexico, as a domestic concern of the United States.

Aside from the political problems, a more difficult obstacle blocking a better relationship is what Adolfo Aguilar, a key aide to former President Echeverria, called the "idiosyncratic resentment" of some Mexicans toward Chicanos.

Enrique Hank Lopez, a Los Angeles attorney who lived in Mexico years ago, described the problem this way:

"They have always had the idea in Mexico that Chicanos were from the lower classes of society. We were the ones who came over during the Depression and so forth. Consequently, they are always kind of surprised to learn that we have achieved any kind of status in this country."

Nava said he occasionally experienced the problem as ambassador.

"I sensed it, more than anything else," he said. "That was one of the hardest things I had to deal with, but I showed them that I could speak the language, that I could discuss philosophy or art or anything else under the sun. . . ."

Carlos H. Zazueta, a Mexican researcher on Mexican-Chicano relations, has written that "the negative perception by Mexicans about Chicanos" is breaking down but still persists.

The historical ambivalence of Mexico toward Chicanos, Zazueta has written, is based on an ambivalence toward the migration process itself.

Under this view, Mexicans who migrated to the United States—and, consequently, their descendants—were viewed as "traitors, opportunists and sellouts."

Prof. Jorge Bustamante, who is considered the chief Mexican expert on Chicanos, said that the inability of many Mexican-Americans to speak the language of their forebears has contributed to the problem.

"This inability was perfectly understandable in view of the impossibility of most Chicanos to learn Spanish grammar correctly in American schools," Bustamante said. "But it tended to cause horror among certain Mexicans of the upper and middle classes."

Given these longstanding attitudes, it was something of a breakthrough when Echeverria initiated *el dialogo* by meeting with Chicano leaders in 1971. He held additional meetings with them over the next



Jorge Bustamante

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five years, both in Mexico and the United States.

A number of participants in the meetings with Echeverria and two successive Mexican presidents said the principal attitude of the chief executives was curiosity.

"I had a feeling of great personal curiosity and interest and concern on their part," said Vilma Martinez, a Los Angeles attorney who chaired the panel at one time.

"The thrust was to have each side educate the other with respect to what each was doing," she said. "We wanted to learn each other's approaches and strategies to problems of mutual interest."

Aguilar, the former aide, said

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microfilm.

Luis Echeverria

He initiated 'el dialogo' in meeting with Chicano leaders in 1971. More meetings were held with them in next five years.



SUNDAY: A LOOK AT THE CHICANO MOVEMENT

vocating stronger political ties with the Mexican-American community at this time. A Mexican diplomat who spoke cautiously on the subject stressed the practical limits of Mexican policy in this regard.

"The fundamental principle of Mexican foreign relations is nonintervention," he said. "Therefore, we can't get involved in any sort of political alliance with Chicanos because we would not want the United States to do the same here."

The Mexican preoccupation with the principle of nonintervention—an obsession, some say—has undercut the government's willingness to cooperate with Chicanos, even in cases where there is a clear-cut mutual interest.

An example is the apparent indifference displayed by Mexican diplomats in Washington regarding new immigration legislation now pending in Congress.

One of the main purposes of the so-called Simpson-Mazzoli legislation is to shut off illegal immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

"We have tried very hard to work with them (Mexican Embassy officials), to get some idea of what they want," said a lobbyist working for a Chicano organization in Washington. "But it is very frustrating. The only answer we ever get is, 'Take care of our people.' That's all."

Most Latino organizations are opposed to the passage of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill because they fear its effect on U.S. Latinos.

The Mexican viewpoint, in the words of a government diplomat here, considers the passage of a new immigration law, regardless of its



MARTHA HARTNETT / Los Angeles Times

Vilma Martinez

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Los Angeles Times

Enrique Lopez

'They have always had the idea in Mexico that Chicanos were from the lower classes of society.'

Echeverria believed there was a demand by Mexican descendants living in the United States for closer contact with the mother country.

But at one time, a diplomat said, it was obvious that Echeverria was "tempted" by the notion of using the Mexican-American community as an instrument of pressure on the U.S. government.

"He was persuaded of the many dangers of that course," the diplomat said quietly.

The Chicano-Mexican political relationship reached its zenith with Echeverria's successor, Jose Lopez Portillo. He not only continued the meetings but on one occasion made treatment of Chicanos by the U.S. government a topic of discussion between himself and President Jimmy Carter.

In 1979, reporting on a meeting between himself and Carter, Lopez Portillo declared he was prepared to defend Chicano interests.

"At the impassioned request of our Chicano brothers, I told the President of the United States that we viewed with great alarm that human rights were being denied them in areas of education, health and legal protection. . . . We stand behind our Chicano brothers and we stand behind our undocumented citizens."

In retrospect, the statement appears largely rhetorical. However, it conveyed an image of solidarity that had heretofore been reserved by Mexico for other Latin Americans. Now Chicanos were part of the great Latin American solidarity, he seemed to say.

Lopez Portillo's remarks contrast sharply with this private assessment of a diplomat in the current

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administration of President Miguel de la Madrid: "The Mexican government has nothing to say about Chicanos. They are, after all, American citizens."

De la Madrid did meet with Chicano leaders on three occasions during his electoral campaign in 1982. The meetings were held in San Diego, El Paso and Mexico City.

But the message that De la Madrid delivered was designed to cool the ardor of those seeking a more active relationship.

According to Bustamante, who helped organize the meetings, De la Madrid said he wanted to "depoliticize" the relationship, to limit it to cultural and social contacts.

Forum Dissolved

De la Madrid has dissolved the forum under which Mexican government officials and Chicano leaders met—a move unlikely to be reversed, according to Bustamante, because the committee "did not function well."

And, blaming severe national economic problems, the government has discontinued its principal educational program for Chicanos. The program provided 250 scholarships to Mexican-Americans annually for study in Mexico.

But contacts in art, music and other cultural areas continue.

A Chicano art and film festival is under way here, and Chicano and Mexican scholars are holding panel discussions on problems confronting Mexican-Americans in the United States.

On Mexican national holidays, the government provides celebrities and entertainers for celebrations in Los Angeles and other major U.S. cities attended by Mexican-Americans.

There is also greater academic interest now in Mexico about Chicanos. Bustamante, for example, encountered faculty resistance a decade ago when he wanted to teach a course on Chicano studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

"They argued that the Chicano phenomenon was just a passing fad unworthy of serious study," he said.

But the course was finally approved, and later drew as many as 125 students each time it was offered.

A summer Mexican studies program for 25 Chicano graduate students, established by Lopez Portillo, is still being offered. For the first time, its director this year is a Chicano—Manuel Garcia y Griego, a native of New Mexico who lives in Mexico City and is a specialist on illegal alien workers.

Continued Interest Seen

And even with the more restrained attitude of the De la Madrid administration toward Chicano relations, no one believes the Mexican government has lost interest in cultivating the Mexican-American community.

A Mexican government official involved in contacts with Chicanos for more than a decade said his country cannot afford to ignore the numerical strength of U.S. Latinos.

"Is that growing force going to be pro-Mexican or anti-Mexican?" he asked. "I think that depends on Mexico. The numbers are such that the United States would have to think twice before promoting any campaign that is perceived as being anti-Mexican. They would first have to explain their actions to a domestic political force that is not indifferent to the fate of Mexico."

Lopez, the Los Angeles lawyer, put it this way: "They sense that the Mexican-American community is gaining political strength, and it's nice to have a friend in court, as it were."

Aguilar, the former presidential aide who has studied at Harvard, said the emerging strength of the Mexican-American community represents "a historic opportunity for Mexico."

He called the millions of Mexican descendants in the United States the "political rear guard" of Mexico and contended that their presence will inevitably affect American for-

eign policy south of the border.

"Consider what is happening in Central America," he said.

"The United States is not fighting the Soviet Union. It is fighting Latin America, and, thus, in a sense, it is fighting Mexico. Some day, thanks to all those Chicanos in that country, the people in Washington will wake up and realize that this can have serious political consequences domestically."

U.S. Political Unrest

But neither Mexicans nor Chicanos see any basis for a related concern that U.S. officials and other Americans might have: that a growing closeness between Mexico and Mexican-Americans could provoke political unrest in the United States.

The Canadian dilemma with French-speaking citizens is often invoked by those who are afraid that another Quebec will be produced on the U.S.-Mexican border in the not-too-distant future. Both Chicanos and Mexicans are skeptical.

"That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard," said Tom Castro, a Los Angeles-area broadcast executive who has been involved in the discussions with Mexico. "The last thing that people who have come from Mexico want is to be ruled by the Mexican government. They may love Mexico, but they don't feel the same about the government there."

"It's ridiculous," Bustamante said. "I guess it is part of the paranoia that you get from time to time in the United States, particularly in times of economic crisis."