

Mexico — What Went Wrong?

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Presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador speaks at a campaign rally in Zitacuaro, Mexico, May 28, 2018. (*Alan Ortega/Reuters*) **Mexico gets a massive cash influx in remittances, American corporations get cheap labor, Democrats get voters . . .**

Mexico in just a few days could elect one of its more anti-American figures in recent memory, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Obrador has often advanced the idea that a strangely aggrieved Mexico has the right to monitor the status of its citizens living illegally in the United States. Lately, he trumped that notion of entitlement by assuring fellow Mexicans that they have a “human right” to enter the United States as they please. For Obrador, this is an innate privilege that he promised “we will defend” — without offering any clarification on the meaning of “defend” other than to render meaningless the historic notion of borders and sovereignty.

Obrador went on to urge his fellow Mexicans to “leave their towns and find a life in the United States.” He has naturally developed such a mindset because he assumes as normal what has become, by any fair standard, a historically abnormal relationship.

Obrador is determined to perpetuate, if not enhance, the asymmetry. In the age of Trump, Obrador also reasons that the furor and hysteria of the American media

toward the president represents a majority and a domestic grassroots pushback against the Trump administration — apparently because of Trump’s “restrictionist” view of enforcing existing immigration law. Polls, however, suggest otherwise, despite their notorious embedded anti-Trump bias.

Mexico, the Aggressor

Facts are stubborn and reveal Mexico, not the United States, as a de facto aggressor and belligerent on many fronts. Mexico runs a NAFTA-protected \$70 billion trade surplus with the U.S., larger than that of any other single American trade partner (including Japan and Germany) except China. The architects of NAFTA long ago assured Americans that such a trade war would not break out, or that we should not worry over trade imbalances, given the desirability of outsourcing to take advantage of Mexico’s cheaper labor costs.

A supposedly affluent Mexico was supposed to achieve near parity with the U.S., as immigration and trade soon neutralized. Despite Mexico’s economic growth, no such symmetry has followed NAFTA. What did, however, 34 years later, was the establishment of a dysfunctional Mexican state, whose drug cartels all but run the country on the basis of their enormous profits from unfettered dope-running and human-trafficking into the United States. NAFTA certainly did not make Mexico a safer, kinder, and gentler nation.

In addition, Mexican citizens who enter and reside as illegal immigrants in the U.S. are mostly responsible for sending an approximate \$30 billion in remittances home to Mexico. That sum has now surpassed oil and tourism as the largest source of Mexican foreign exchange. That huge cash influx is the concrete reality behind Obrador’s otherwise unhinged rhetoric about exercising veto power over U.S. immigration law.

What is also unsaid is that many of the millions of Mexican expatriates in the United States who send remittances home to Mexico are themselves beneficiaries of some sort of U.S. federal, state, or local support that allows them to free up cash to send back to Mexico.

When Obrador urges his fellow citizens to abandon their country and head illegally into the United States, his primary concern is *not* their general welfare and futures. He seems quite unconcerned that those who send home remittances live in poverty in the United States and seek offsetting subsidies from the U.S. government to find enough disposable income to save the Mexican government from its mostly corrupt self.

Why the U.S. government does not tax remittances and why it does not prohibit foreign nationals on public assistance from sending cash out of the country are some of the stranger phenomena of the entire strange illegal-immigration matrix.

There may now be anywhere from 11 million to 20 million illegal aliens in the U.S. America's open border is the keystone of Mexican foreign and domestic policy. For all practical purposes, Mexico City alone modulates the flow of both Mexican and Central American citizens into the United States — depending on its current attitude toward the U.S.

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Mexico plays the same role with the United States that North African countries play with Europe, except in the former's case, it has a deliberate rather than chaotic emigration policy — and uses it as direct leverage over the U.S. Mexico's sense of immigration entitlement is predicated on the assumption that corporate America wants cheap labor, that liberal America wants voters, that identity-politics activists need constituents, that a liberal elite expresses its abstract virtue by its patronization of the Other — and that until recently most Americans were indifferent.

Conservatives, who object to waves of illegal aliens swarming the border, earn boilerplate slurs that they are cruel, racist, nativist, xenophobic, selfish, and anti-humanitarian. Open-borders liberals, who once expressed opposition to illegal immigration, take their cues from the concrete recent record showing that almost all impoverished immigrants fuel progressive agendas of big government, redistribution, and entitlements that otherwise have run out of gas.

Exporting human capital — most illegal Mexican immigrants are now from southern Mexican and indigenous people — has long acted as a political safety valve for the Mexican government. Its grandees are largely the descendants of European aristocrats and have shown little desire to enact the constitutional, human-rights, and economic reforms that they assume are the norm in the U.S. and that might help Mexican citizens live safely and profitably in their own homeland. Certainly, there appears to be little real self-reflection in Mexico about how and why such a naturally rich country — blessed with good soil, climate, natural resources, ports, and a strategic geography — remains so dismally poor.

Illegal immigration provides a useful and nearly perpetual demographic for Mexico inside the U.S. About 12 percent of the Mexican population now lives inside the United States, the great majority illegally. Los Angeles may be the second-largest city of Mexican nationals in the world. Of all U.S. immigrants, legal and not, it is estimated that more than 30 percent come from Mexico, and another quarter arrived from Central America through Mexico.

The activist expatriate community also insidiously pressures the U.S. to a more pro-Mexican foreign policy. The Democratic party has discovered — especially since 2008, the watershed year in which the Obamas and most of the Democratic party institutionalized the idea of illegal immigration recalibrating the Electoral College —

that open borders provide a steady stream of potential first- and second-generation voters who in the past have flipped red states blue (such as California, New Mexico, and Nevada). The careers of identity-politics activists often hinge on having a permanent pool of poor, unskilled, and minimum-wage-earning constituents who need collective representation by self-appointed advocates. Without illegal immigration, Chicano or La Raza studies would in a few years resonate about as much as a Polish- or Italian-studies department.

Only in the U.S. would an illegal immigrant cross the border on Monday and in theory be eligible for affirmative action on Tuesday. Supposedly, a racist and bigoted America owes an illegal alien and his children employment or education reparations for their own deprived childhoods in Mexico, or as recompense for the racism they will soon inevitably encounter in the U.S., a bias that apparently did not bother millions when they chose to leave their own country and cross the border illegally.

The existential worry of both identity-politics activists and the new Democratic party is an immigration that is diverse, legal, meritocratic, and measured. The second-greatest fear is a return of the melting pot and the end of the salad bowl, given that assimilation, integration, and intermarriage might turn a useful bloc of Hispanics immigrants into something like 20th-century Italian immigrants, who eventually assimilated and whose politics were no longer predictable.

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Mexican foreign policy has been as brilliant as it has been cynical. Its signature theme has been an Art of the Deal politicking to harangue the U.S. about its supposedly illiberal treatment of Mexicans, whom Mexico itself has illiberally treated as a way of facilitating even more illegal immigration. The more the U.S. is on the apologetic defensive, and the more it has to prove its global humanitarian fides — the more it is likely to suspend its own immigration law and allow in more Mexican citizens without legal authorization. In one of the strangest paradoxes of the present age, Mexico seems to love its people more, the farther they are from Mexico and the longer they stay away. And that convenient love is requited: The longer illegal aliens are in the U.S., the more they can afford to become staunch pro-Mexican adherents — again, as long as they do not have to return to Mexico.

We are warned by Obrador that a new relationship with the U.S. is on the horizon, and pundits warn us that six of ten Mexican now view the U.S. unfavorably. But what exactly would a new militant anti-U.S. policy look like, given that the current relationship is already so lopsided in favor of Mexico?

There are several U.S. concessions to Mexico that a nationalist Obrador should logically pursue if he were truly an anti-American activist of the Venezuelan, Cuban, or Nicaraguan brand. He might demand repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens currently in American jails. He could call for the repatriation of the

11 million to 20 million Mexicans living in the U.S. Obrador could either leave NAFTA or demand increases in Mexico's astounding \$71 billion trade surpluses with the U.S. And, of course, he could put an end to remittances, arguing that the \$30 billion that Mexican nationals sends home is a burden on Mexico's exploited expatriate poor and should cease. Promises, promises . . .

In sum, Obrador is in a surreal position. He is posing as an anti-American, to channel popular anger at Trump, while at the same time assuming that an obtuse United States will continue to tolerate open borders, billions of dollars in remittances, interference in U.S. politics, huge trade deficits — and somewhere between 11 million and 20 million illegal aliens inside the United States.

Restoring Symmetry

What might the U.S. do to restore symmetry and save Mexico from its own delusions?

It should control its own border with Mexico as carefully as Mexico polices its own southern border. That vigilance can be achieved mostly by stiffening employer sanctions on hiring illegal aliens, finishing the wall, and warnings to Mexico that there will be trade and commercial consequences for cynically facilitating the transit of millions of illegal aliens from Central America.

It might calibrate trade and commercial interactions to illegal immigration, allowing Mexico to determine whether it is worth losing its trade surpluses to maintain its remittances. A tax on remittances might be useful in funding the construction of a border wall.

But most important, the moral calculus of illegal immigration has gone haywire and must be rebooted. It is an immoral act, not a moral one, to deliberately break the laws of a host country as one's first act on entering it.

A million cases a year of tax fraud through the use of fake names and identification is not just an artifact of illegal immigration, but a moral crime that callously harms U.S. citizens and their institutions.

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It is not ethical to cut in front of an immigration line, when millions of others abroad await, legally and with patience, their applications for U.S. residence.

It is not honorable for a foreign leader to claim that his own people are privileged immigrants who deserve, on the basis of their race or nationality, favoritism over Asian, African, or European would-be immigrants.

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It is an act of belligerency for a nation to undermine the laws of its neighbor — and boast that more of the same is to come.

There has been much wild talk of the “servitude” and “serfdom” of impoverished illegal aliens. But the real moral travesty is that Mexico's entire foreign and economic policy is based on exporting its poor people abroad to scrimp and save cash to send home to provide the support their own government will not.

The United States has many enemies in the world, but it is hard to find one that deliberately is trying to undermine U.S. law by exporting its own citizens to change the demographic and politics of its supposed ally.

It is almost impossible to find enemies that can so carefully extract billions of dollars in remittances and surpluses from the U.S. economy. Most enemies do not send as many human traffickers and drugs into the U.S. as does Mexico. And does an Iran or North Korea boast that it has the right to violate U.S. law, interfere in the domestic politics of America, and vow that it will continue to do so as it pleases?

So, what, then, is the new Mexico — a friend, an enemy, neither, or both?