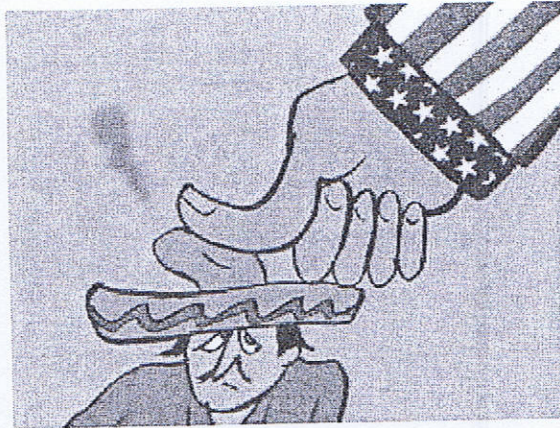


The dangers of Mexico-bashing

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America's politicians damage their own country by insulting its southern neighbour



A CENTURY ago Porfirio Díaz, a Mexican dictator, lamented the fact that his country was "so far from God and so close to the United States". The difference today is that Mexico has swallowed its doubts and bound itself to the Great Satan through the North American Free-Trade Agreement (NAFTA). And having become a democracy, too, Mexico's close partnership with the United States is nowadays based on common values as well as common interests.

Or so it thought. Over the past couple of years Mexicans have had to watch as their country has been the victim of some decidedly unfriendly treatment from its neighbour. This began when the American Congress, largely at Republican urging, squashed attempts to regulate migration, opting instead to build a fence along stretches of the Mexican border.

Next, the candidates in the Democratic primary tried to outdo each other in their hostility to NAFTA. Barack Obama, like Hillary Clinton, called for the treaty to be scrapped, or rewritten to include more labour and environmental safeguards. What was odd about this was that the source of their anxieties—an alleged hollowing-out of American manufacturing—has much more to do with competition from China than from Mexico.

To add insult to possible injury, there is a wrangle over anti-drug aid. On taking office as Mexico's president in 2006, Felipe Calderón cracked down on powerful, well-armed drug mafias. These had thrived, largely unmolested, for decades, infecting the police and politics. Mexico lacks a national police force. So while he tries to create one Mr Calderón has deployed the army. So far this year some 1,600 people have been killed in drug violence, including 450 police and soldiers.

Since this is a fight Mexico's democracy cannot afford to lose, Mr Calderón has taken a historic step for his proud country and turned to the United States for help. The Bush administration offered \$1.4 billion over three years, much of it for helicopters, communications gear and training. This is hardly extortionate, given that America's consumers of illicit drugs are the main source of Mexico's drug problem, that American gun shops along the border supply the mafias with weapons and that many of the chemicals for Mexican methamphetamine production pass freely through Californian ports.

And yet the Democrats in control of Capitol Hill could not resist the temptation to tie the assistance to conditions that Mexicans are entitled to consider humiliating. One such was to make the first \$400m tranche of aid contingent on Mexico promising that any troops accused of abuses should face civilian trials. However desirable such a policy may be, seeking to impose it in this way was to treat Mexico as if it were Myanmar. Fortunately a compromise is now in sight that may satisfy pride on both sides.

Try some simple courtesy, for a change

Even so, there is a lesson here, for Mr Obama and the Democrats in particular. (To his credit, John McCain championed the failed immigration reform and is a fervent advocate of NAFTA.) Mexico has obvious flaws. Its monopolistic economy has failed to create enough jobs to keep its young people at home. Its police and judiciary are sometimes venal and often incompetent. It will never be as influential as China, a country America knows it must placate as well as chide.

But it behooves Americans to show it more respect. Mr Calderón is trying to do many things that are in America's interest as well as Mexico's, from reining in drug gangs to allowing private investment in a declining state-owned oil industry. Mexico's stance towards its neighbour was long prickly and uncooperative. It could turn that way again. In an election year, Mexico-bashing may seem tempting. But it is short-sighted as well as unstatesman-like. And since most Hispanic-Americans have Mexican roots, it might even cost votes.