Images of Mexico in the U.S. News Media

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A. The International Implications of a Media Culture

A media culture has emerged in our time in which images, sounds, and spectacles constitute major threads in the fabric of everyday life. These tend to dominate leisure time; shape political views, public opinion, and social behavior; and provide many of the materials out of which people forge their very identity. Television, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, advertising, and other products of the so-called “culture industries” are indeed important components that people draw on as they construct prevalent views of the world. They are especially effective at furnishing us with models of what it means to be male or female, a success or a failure, powerful or powerless, “good” or “evil,” and so on. Media stories and images bring into our homes symbols and myths that help to constitute a common culture shared by many or even most individuals in most parts of the world today. It has been

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argued that these figurative elements are central to modern capitalist culture, in that they provide all of us, whether we like it or not, with the modes whereby our experiences can be organized and patterned.

This unique managerial function of the media becomes all the more significant, and some would say dangerous, when it is played out in the international arena. For given the fact that the vast majority of individuals have not traveled much to other countries in order to acquire first-hand experience of other cultures, their information about other nations inevitably comes to them through the filtering medium of newspapers, books, television, radio, films, and the Internet. In other words, when neither education nor experience have provided a person or group with any significant understanding or appreciation of the "other," then their decisions and points of view are open to considerable influence through habituation to the recurring issues, images, and stereotypes taken from the mass media of their societies.

Thus, critical to the quality of political relations between modern nations are the images that each shapes of the other in its mass media and then projects onto its "general public" over time. In the case of the United States and Mexico, however, this factor has been closely linked with another: the vast assymetry of power that has characterized the relations between these two nations. This means that the vast influence of American ideological projections on, and cultural perceptions of, its southern neighbor, as reflected in its various mass media, is one of the prime movers in determining Mexico’s international reputation and credibility as a country and society. Virtually all of today’s Mexicans, but above all its government officials, businesspeople, policy-makers, and intellectuals, fully understand that they have no choice but to partake of American coverage of their country to inform the "big picture" of their own political, economic, social, and cultural debates with a sense of geopolitical reality. Quite simply, the United States has become a far more concrete part of Mexican reality and political discourse than vice versa.

Now, although some would have us believe that U.S. media images
are every bit as varied as American life itself, really it cannot be denied that they do convey inherited, preconceived notions about Americans, Mexicans, and other peoples of the world. And regardless of whether they are accurate or erroneous, consistent or inconsistent, such notions clearly do form the basis of expectations for future communicative interaction at many levels among Americans, Mexicans, and peoples of other countries,

B. An Overview of this Book

This book constitutes one of the first-ever efforts to offer readers access to a wide-ranging, open, and thought-provoking discussion, in which Mexican and American journalists, scholars, financial experts, and politicians assess U.S. mainstream news media coverage of Mexico and Mexicans, and the repercussions therefrom. Most of the articles it contains are edited transcripts of talks given at a conference entitled “Images of Mexico in the U.S. Media.” The exceptions are this introduction, Ralph Izard’s Conference Report, and Mariana Servin’s detailed study of U.S. media patterns and trends regarding Mexico from 1995 to 1999. The conference was jointly sponsored by The Freedom Forum’s International Division of the Media Studies Center; by Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, and its Institute for Latin American and Iberian Studies; and by the Mexican Cultural Institute of New York. It was held at Newseum and Columbia University, in New York City, on February 3 and 4, 2000.

There is no need at this juncture to dwell on the content of each chapter, because in the Conference Report that immediately follows this introduction, Ralph Izard, Coordinator of the International Initiative on Journalism Education at the Media Studies Center, offers a very detailed and illuminating analytical account of the main issues touched upon by all the participants and the audience. Izard’s report is followed by Ambassador Jorge Pinto’s Closing Remarks, where he offers the reader a very useful and concise summary of the conference. Suffice it to say that I have based my editorial decisions here on the format of the conference itself, that having been three panels plus a keynote speech. Thus in Part II, for instance, “The Coverage of Mexico by the U.S. News Media,” my goal was to keep alive the
sort of give and take, that always can be counted on to arise whenever journalists get together and interact. So too, in the last section of Part III, "The Mexican Perspective on U.S. Media Coverage," consists of the question-and-answer session precisely as it transpired between the panel participants and the audience. In all other cases the presentations have been edited so as to resemble short essays. Finally, let it be noted that I have thought it best to insert an editor's note whenever a particular event or issue seemed to stand in need of either further explanation or historical context for it to be properly understood.

Let me close this section by saying that while there can be no doubt that we today live in a media-oriented or even media-driven society, that does not mean we can allow ourselves to be lulled into passively accepting projected images of other peoples and cultures. Thus, it is our hope that the pieces in this collection will aid each reader in becoming a watchful and informed critic of the role of the media in modern society, and in looking with a new and heightened interest at the images of Mexico and Mexicans projected by the U.S. news media.

C. Historical Context

"The assymetrical relationship between Mexico and the United States." That's how Jorge Pinto, Consul General of Mexico in New York, chose to refer to it in his closing remarks to the conference. This assymetry has long been explored by those in the political, academic, and journalistic circles of both countries, through their use of such concepts as "dependency," "domination," and "hegemony," and by their speaking paradoxically of "distant neighbors." But as we seek here to restrict our view to the U.S. news media, we need ask only one question: How has the aforementioned assymetrical relationship been projected onto the general public by its mainstream media, in the shape of a product known as "news about Mexico"?

In order to answer this question we must try to take a broader view, that of the historical context within which the various U.S. media have projected images of Mexico onto the American general public.
Historically, most U.S. media analyses and images have posited not a similarity but a difference between the United States and Mexico. As radically opposed to their treatment of the “developed” countries and regions of Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, Mexico has been presented as part of a region (Latin America) that is characterized by failed opportunities and authoritarianism.

And when we reverse the viewpoint, looking this time from south to north, we note that ever since Mexico won its independence from Spain early in the 19th century, history has taught it that when it comes to the endless confrontation with its northern neighbor, it has few defenses. Many Mexicans see the United States as a frequent meddler in Mexico’s political affairs, as having a virtual stranglehold on the Mexican economy, and as endlessly promoting that problematic cultural phenomenon known as “the American way of life.” This perceptual problem certainly has been exacerbated by the way in which Mexico’s politicians, intellectuals, and mass media have over many decades promulgated the view that many incidents injurious to Mexico can be directly traced back to activities in Washington.

On the other hand, few Mexicans express hostility toward Americans as individuals. To the contrary, Mexico’s growing middle class enthusiastically adopts American consumer patterns, ensures that its children learn English, and vacations in the United States whenever it can. Poorer Mexicans continue to stream across the northern border into that land which seems to hold out to them the job not available at home. Still, nationalism and even anti-Americanism always have been natural by-products of the uneasy relationship between these two neighbors. For as Alan Riding points out: “[Mexican] Nationalism is an inward-looking phenomenon that cannot prevent unneighborly acts by the United States but enables the country to survive the blows. It perpetuates the belief that Mexico is owed a historical debt by the United States which allows it to ignore American ‘favors’ and to rage against American offenses without costly reprisals.”

If it is true that many Mexicans are almost obsessed with the role the United States plays in their country, such an attitude certainly stands in sharp contrast to the standard American view of Mexico as amounting to little more than a footnote to their own nation’s history. Let us briefly review some of the recurring images of Mexico and Mexicans that have appeared in the U.S. media through the years, so that these may serve as the backdrop to our ensuing analysis of more recent images of Mexico projected by the mainstream U.S. news media.

Most of the novels, newspapers, films, television programs, and textbooks all of us have encountered over the years have shown us a “developed” United States, a “normal” and “structured” country which stands a pole apart from an underdeveloped, “exotic,” and poverty-stricken Mexico, the natural home of the bandito, the greaser, the poor Indian, the drug lord, and the corrupt policeman. The genesis of all those well-loved Hollywood types can be traced all the way back to the U.S. print media’s negative images of Mexico, as these emerged out of coverage of the Mexican-American war. Mexico soon was looming large in the American public consciousness as a particularly inept yet cruel enemy. Then there followed the emergence of “western” fiction, a form that achieved great economic and entertainment success through the “dime novel” and that brought to a mass audience images of good Anglo cowboys thrashing bad mexicanos and Indians.

This trend was only exacerbated by the arrival of the movies at the end of the nineteenth century. For, as the Mexican political analyst Jesús Silva Herzog Márquez mentions in his presentation, throughout the twentieth century most of the images of Mexico held by most Americans came to them out of the cinema as opposed to literature or the press. And I would add that these filmed “westerns” produced in the early years of the century served strongly to reinforce negative and enigmatic public perceptions of Mexico in the United States. Then after 1910 the Mexican revolution, and Pancho Villa in particular, captured the imagination of American filmmakers. This meant that soon the ranks of greasers and bandidos had been swelled by tequila-drinking revolutionaries, swaggering and staggering through a land of chaos.
and menace. Indeed, the negative stereotyping had by 1919 become so widespread that the Mexican government issued a formal protest to American filmmakers, accusing them of dwelling upon Mexico’s worst aspects and threatening to severely curtail their activities in Mexico.

As a result, a few rather insignificant changes were introduced. The term “greaser” was dropped, as well as the showing of wild Mexican bandit groups. And in a few cases, such as 1920’s The Mark of Zorro, Mexicans were even allowed to demonstrate courage. Then, with the advent of World War II, Mexico’s strategic importance prompted the U.S. government to encourage Hollywood to join in its “Good Neighbor Policy.” As a result of this move, there was added to the old exotic stereotypes a good bit of reassuring romance and music. Even Walt Disney produced two films about the United States’ amusing and friendly amigos “down Mexico way”: Saludos Amigos (1943), and The Three Caballeros (1945.) These films, full of “warm” Latino stereotypes, presaged the later influx of Latino and especially Mexican cartoon characters, with the (in)famous Speedy Gonzalez heading the pack.²

The postwar years, and especially the emergence of the Soviet bloc as a perceived threat to U.S. interests, brought with them a diminished interest in Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. Most of the films produced in this era gave us a Mexico relatively passive and inert, a mere backdrop for Anglo conflict and moral triumph. Then again, the evil “Gold Tooth,” Humphrey Bogart’s nemesis in the 1947 film classic Treasure of the Sierra Madre, certainly did bring the Mexican bandido back to the American movie screen, and with a vengeance. A decade later, in 1958, we see an interest in the border region emerging in Orson Welles’s A Touch of Evil. While this film’s Mexican border town is a hotbed of vice and corruption, nonetheless its hero is a Mexican agent who has somehow managed to pull off the ultimate coup: marriage to a blond American! This interest in the corrupt Mexican next door would be

²It should be noted at this juncture that every bit as prejudicial as these early stereotypical images designed for a young movie and later television audience, have been those children school textbooks and learning materials that stress the exotic and the negative. These have left young U.S. students poorly prepared to understand Mexican history and culture.
reflected in the many other “border films” of the ensuing decades; and would lead at last to today’s all-too-common depictions of Mexicans as representing a sheer menace within U.S. borders — whether as undocumented workers, members of Latino urban gangs, or drug lords.

As television, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, slowly but steadily eclipsed the centrality of the movies in the United States, its programmers took the understandable step of adopting many of the images already well established on the big screen, of a turbulent Mexico next door. What really matters, though, is that while thousands of movies and television programs have in one way or another included Mexicans or Mexico, the latter have very rarely been featured as their central subjects.

D. The U.S. News Media

Of course, television has offered us not just entertainment but also “serious” daily analysis of local and international events; at first, through the three main broadcasting companies, and then more recently through cable. Indeed, this trend has moved at so fast a pace that these news programs, news-magazines, and special documentaries have become the principal source of foreign news for most U.S. citizens. The problem here, as John Bailey has pointed out, is that television coverage feeds on action and vivid imagery — gun battles, natural disasters, violent demonstrations, and overt human dramas of all types. Thus, with the exception of that type of event — in Mexico’s case, the 1985 earthquake, Colosio’s assassination, and so on — “they [the major networks and cable companies] provide generally less consistent coverage of Mexico than the newspapers, with periods of neglect followed by spurts of interest.” 3 I would add to Bailey’s insight, following upon Mexican journalist Sergio Sarmiento’s remarks at the conference, that even newspapers are event-driven. And because the newspapers’ chief role is not to offer long-term analysis, most news pieces fail to provide their readers with sufficient context to allow them to form a coherent view of an event.

We have taken brief note of the negative stereotypes of Mexico and Mexicans that have appeared within the entertainment sector of the American mass media, the movies in particular. Until recently, however, there was little space for news about Mexico on the spectrum of American mainstream television and print news—not with the Cold War, Western Europe, and trouble spots like the Middle East crowding it out. Granted, a slight upswing in the news media's interest in Mexico came with the 1968 student demonstrations in Mexico City. That interest has remained at a slightly higher level ever since there began, in the early 1970s, that phenomenon which has made Mexico a perennial theme in the American media: the illegal migration of Mexican workers. At the very least, this process has been the first to supply Americans with a constant flow of information about any aspect of Mexican life. And that information flow has become gradually stronger, as the migration problem has become linked in American minds with drug trafficking and with the presence of drug money in Mexico's political and social life.

While these two issues, migration and drugs—both of them central to the conference's debates, along with corruption—have made Mexico somewhat famous north of the border, they also have contributed greatly to constructing a negative image of Mexico in the eyes of the U.S. public in general. Worse yet, these have made Mexico an "issue" country, with all other possible U.S. press treatments of its southern neighbor being crowded off the page or the screen by these two. Such very limited coverage was prevalent at least until the end of the 1980s, and stands in stark contrast to the wider and deeper coverage of countries deemed more vital to U.S. foreign policy interests, of the friendly or allied nations of Western Europe, and even of such "enemies" as the old Soviet Union.

Ironically, however, in the Mexico of 1960s and 1970s, what was said and published in the United States about Mexico had minor importance and played no decisive role in shaping the national political debate. Two possible explanations suggest themselves here. First, as Sergio Aguayo reminds us, the Mexican regimes of those decades felt confident of their standing in the United States, owing to the support traditionally provided
to Mexican leadership by the U.S. elites. Second, the governments of those days exerted so much influence upon Mexico’s newspapers and television stations that there was little room for dissent and outside influence.

The main obstacle that had to be overcome, by foreign correspondents working out of Mexico in those two decades, was the lack of accessible sources of information. Until very recently, Mexico has not been, as former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico James Jones reminded us at the conference, a country in which the free flow of information is seen as a public asset. Thus during the 1960s and 1970s the Mexican government had no great interest in maintaining good relations with the foreign press; to the contrary, there was a certain hostility and fear. To actually make a statement to the foreign press would have been looked upon as suspicious by the ruling elite. On the other hand, as Sergio Sarmiento has noted, even such a major U.S. newspaper as The Wall Street Journal had no full-time correspondent in Mexico until 1981, prior to that year covering the country through its office in Houston. An exception to this rule of indifference was Alan Riding of The New York Times, who lived in Mexico for many years and provided his readers with a broader view of Mexico, its culture and people.

In the ensuing period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, three stories above all would serve to transform the American media’s perception of Mexico: the discovery of extensive oil resources; the Mexican foreign policy toward Central America; and the decision on the part of President Lopez Portillo (1976-82) not to permit the return of the exiled Shah of Iran to Mexico. Soon there were appearing on American television screens and in many newspapers and magazines a growing number of reports on Mexico’s increasingly acute social problems: unemployment, poverty, corruption, authoritarianism, and so on. All of those negative factors draw a pattern for the United States mainstream media to see Mexico as undergoing an “Iran syndrome”: as a country where grave internal conflicts were closing in. Articles began to appear which aired the possibility that the Central

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American leftist subversions could also "topple" Mexico through the workings of the "domino effect." Such fears were intensified by the dawning realization that the oil boom had, instead of strengthening the Mexican economy, brought Mexico a huge debt and fiscal chaos.

This new American image of Mexico, as a country that was being politically "overwhelmed" and hence becoming ungovernable, was reinforced by the foreign policy views of such right-wing Americans as Jesse Helms. These individuals increasingly and almost instinctively came to look upon Mexico as an adversary, owing to what they considered Mexico's "leftist" foreign policy vis-à-vis Central America and its rejection of the Shah.

During this same period, many of Mexico's politicians, intellectuals, and media personalities felt that the American security agencies, and the political groups closely allied to the Reagan administration, believed that endless U.S. media dramatizations of the problems Mexico was undergoing would somehow serve to provoke change south of the border. All the negative U.S. media images of Mexico had fostered a belief among these Mexicans that whenever the U.S. government inserts a particular theme in the area of national security, the news media adjust their agendas in order to follow suit.

All of this of course brings us to the familiar debate, one that lies beyond the limits of this introduction, as to the relation between foreign policy and the news media. All we can do here is to take note of the two basic views in this regard. Some believe that the media perform an invaluable service to democracy by taking foreign policy out of the hands of an elite and opening up the process to an ill-informed public. Others think that the media closely tailor their stories to the pronouncements of a foreign policy elite. As with other issues, the true picture most likely is a composite of those two views.

In any case, at the same time as the American media were beginning to awaken to the complexity of Mexican life, the administration of President de la Madrid (1982-1988), one that had inherited a chaotic
spectre of international public opinion. Thus this era was characterized by highly cautious and manipulative relations between Mexican officialdom and the U.S. media. The Mexican government tried to construct a relation of understanding with the American correspondents by employing such archaic procedures as the application of pressure, the restriction of areas of coverage, the providing of misinformation, and so on. What we learn, however, from this nervous and largely ineffectual quest for control, is that the Mexican government had at last begun to confront the fact that the mainstream U.S. media now occupied a central space in Mexico’s internal debate, as well as in its interplay of perceptions and forces.

The most signal media failure of the de la Madrid administration lay in the fact that it never found a way to convey to the U.S. public, and particularly to those American ruling groups which were then mainly Republican and right-wing, the fact that it had altered its Central American and economic policies in ways that they would find “positive.” Ironically, what very likely played a role in ensuring that Americans never got the new Mexican messages were all those aspects of anti-American nationalism that had been cultivated over so many decades by Mexico’s officials and opinion-makers.

During the de la Madrid administration, however, dramatic events once again would reshape American images of Mexico. The assassination of American DEA agent Enrique Camarena received wide U.S. coverage, as did the electoral process then under way in such states as Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila. The political activities undertaken in those elections by the center-right political party known as PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional), and the active presence in Mexico of Ambassador John Gavin (a close friend of President Reagan), not only altered American perceptions of a leftist Mexico but consolidated a development that had been in germ for many years. I refer to the fact that American reporters now were in the habit of seeking out such noted figures as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Castañeda, Enrique Krauze, and Carlos Monsivais, in order to gain from them a critical per-
spective that they could relay back to the American public. These new unofficial spokespersons began to gain in credibility and to occupy, paradoxically, more image-space than the Mexican authorities themselves. Since in Mexico the declarations of high officials have traditionally occupied the largest media spaces and been accorded the highest levels of respect, it was inevitable that those authorities would feel they were being deliberately marginalized by the mainstream U.S. media.

Important as the preceding trends certainly were, one still can say that the 1988 presidential elections brought with them a 180-degree turnaround in U.S. media coverage of Mexico. What especially took American correspondents and experts on Mexico by surprise were the highly critical opinions, voiced both by many Mexicans and by other foreign correspondents, of the massive electoral fraud that had brought Carlos Salinas to power. Very few in the United States had foreseen the possible triumph of a leftist candidate, much less someone like Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas who was identified in the United States with an anti-American nationalism associated with the memory of his father’s nationalizing of the oil industry.

Despite an abundance of non-governmental information tending to confirm the electoral fraud, including reporting done for independent Mexican newspapers and magazines, many American correspondents and editorialists assumed a posture of caution. And it was in this new media environment that the new administration of Carlos Salinas sought to entirely reinvent the Mexican government’s relations with the American media. Salinas was well aware of de la Madrid’s failure to convey his new policies to Washington and New York, and even more aware of the urgent need to get the negative impression of rigged elections out of the public’s mind. Thus he made it his first order of business to project northward the image of a president “open,” “frank,” and decidedly “pro-American.” His administration made much of his excellent personal relationship with President Bush, of his graduate studies at Harvard, and of his complete mastery of the English language.
Perhaps most important of all, Salinas established far more fluid and cordial relationships with the American correspondents in Mexico than had any president before him. Indeed, he gave more of his time to foreign, and especially to American, television and print reporters and columnists, than he did to their Mexican counterparts. It was by such means as exclusive interviews with American correspondents, and invitations to all kinds of presidential events, that he was able to exert his strong powers of persuasion. Soon it was as if the old 1980s image of a Mexico trapped in an “Iran syndrome” had given way to a bright, Mexican-style glasnost of the early 1990s.

Behind all of the images of “modernity” and “development” so carefully manufactured by the Salinas administration, there lay an entire economic program of privatization. That program was in essence legitimized with the signing of NAFTA, a moment that crowned all of Salinas’s efforts to forge an alliance between Mexico and the United States. Thus it comes as no surprise that NAFTA and its repercussions became one of the central topics of debate during the conference. Despite their differences of outlook on it, virtually all participants were of one mind in believing it to have inalterably changed the nature and level of the U.S. news media’s coverage of Mexico.

Only a year or two into its sexenio (six-year term), the Salinas administration was encountering obstacles to its full legitimacy, largely owing to those echoes of criticism against his government still reverberating through the American press. New strategies were called for, to counteract the presence of critics in the U.S. print media, and to thereby further the acceptance of NAFTA. One such strategy sought to reduce all media criticisms of the Mexican government to party positions, above all to the nationalistic ones that had emerged out of the Cárdenas movement. Another led the Mexican government to hire very expensive, U.S.-based communications and public relations firms to lobby the editorial boards of the chief American newspapers and broadcasting companies, and the Hollywood studios. The goal was for all of these to send out to the United States, Mexico, and indeed the whole world, the most attractive possible images of Mexico. It is important
to underline here that the Zedillo administration has continued to rely on U.S. communications and public relations firms to project the image of the Mexican government until the present day.

With the success of these strategies, both the Mexican and the U.S. media soon were permeated with images of a Mexico in the process of modernization, and of a visionary Mexican president guiding the country on its way to becoming a member of the First World. Of course, in 1994 that image was negatively affected by the Chiapas uprising in January and by the assassination of Salinas’s hand-picked successor, Luis D. Colosio, in March. Gradually, a new theory emerged in the U.S. press: that there were indeed two Mexicos one lured on into a modernized and technological future, another bound to an archaic and poverty-stricken past. Thus the image of a “new Mexico” had been split in two. Finally, in December of that year, the new image of Mexico was shattered seemingly beyond repair, as a deep economic crisis set in. And in this environment of confusion all of the old standby issues (illegal workers, the drug trade, the massive gap between rich and poor, etc.) came once again to the fore.

As Joel Simon, Deputy Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, pointed out at the conference, during those first months of the new Zedillo administration many American journalists felt “burned” because they had written very favorable stories about the Salinas government and therefore were widely criticized for not taking a more skeptical approach to it. Thus, it comes as no surprise that such a skeptical approach did permeate the first years of the Zedillo administration.

Before turning to a brief discussion of the present-day administration in Mexico, I want to take this opportunity to stress just how impressive and positive was the change in U.S. news media coverage that came during the Salinas administration. We have seen how during the de la Madrid administration images of difference and otherness notably prevailed, thereby keeping Mexico firmly in its place as an “issue” country when viewed from north of the border. In sharp contrast, the images during the Salinas years projected a new vision of the two nations moving toward many of the same goals and sharing much the
same outlook. During those years, and especially once the ending of the Gulf War had freed up the television screens and front pages of newspapers and magazines, Mexico began to be covered far more extensively. Beyond the “traditional” pieces on drugs, migration, and corruption, we now began to see news pieces on aspects of Mexican culture, on the economic plight of workers, on the environment, and so on. In short, we saw a wider coverage more closely resembling that accorded to Western Europe and to the old Soviet Union.

There is a clear irony here, in that it was only a media climate stressing a commonality of interests between the United States and Mexico that made possible a more fair and in-depth analysis of those factors that really do make Mexico a one-of-a-kind nation. Unfortunately, however, many of these image-gains largely fell apart during the first years of the Zedillo administration, characterized by economic crisis and political turmoil.

Still, almost all participants in the conference agreed that the Zedillo administration, even as it dealt with one of the worst economic crises of the century, also managed to embark on wide political and economic reforms that have brought Mexico a far more democratic culture. This in turn has had enormous repercussions vis-à-vis the actions of the Mexican news media, which rapidly have turned into free and critical vehicles provoking debate among their audiences and offering a balanced and in-depth coverage of national events. One healthy result of this positive trend has been a diminishing of the U.S. news media’s influence in Mexican politics and society; although their influence remains strong, that of their Mexican counterparts has begun to even the playing field. And now that the economic recovery has begun in the second half of the present administration, the U.S. news media, while still focusing on the staple issues of drugs, migration, and corruption, also has begun to take what many consider a “more balanced” view of Mexico and Mexicans.

E. Conclusion

I have tried to provide the reader, in this introduction, with some sense
of the changes that have been seen through the years in Mexico’s image as depicted by the U.S. news media. That is, of course, the central topic of this book. And indeed, a recurring theme at the conference, elaborated on by ambassador James Jones, author Pete Hamill, and president of the Inter-American Dialogue, Peter Hakim, is this need for as broad a contextual framework as possible, within which international media images can be analyzed.

I would only add this reminder: that our images of the other — in this case, of Mexico — are never derived from a static or frozen set of circumstances, but rather are continuously in process, in flux. Our recognition of that fact also will lead us to recognize that styles and stresses in U.S. news reporting over the years have been deeply influenced not only by past images and stereotypes of Mexico and Mexicans, but also by American events and political/intellectual trends. The Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War in the 1960s; the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s; the ever-growing accent on human rights ever since the Carter administration; and today, globalization and multiculturalism — all of these have tended to set both the tone and the agenda for each era’s reporters, editors, corporate media officials, and even the public at large.

Thus, Mexico rarely appeared in the pages of the chief U.S. newspapers in the 1980s, when raging conflicts in Central America and in the Middle East, the reforms of the Soviet Union initiated by Gorbachev, Poland’s Solidarity movement, and the fight against apartheid in South Africa, to name just a few of that decade’s trends, were absorbing most of the media spotlight. But particularly after the Gulf War ended in 1991, the demise of the Soviet Union fed a growing interest in free-market issues and approaches, which of course the media could tie in directly to Salinas’s “new” Mexico.

Today Mexico is yet again “the darling of the financial community,” in the words of conference participant and Goldman Sachs chief investment strategist for Latin America, Jorge Mariscal; this, largely owing to
what is seen as the responsible economic policy implemented by the Zedillo administration. Sally Jacobsen, international editor of the Associated Press, and Andrew Rosenthal, foreign editor of *The New York Times*, agreed that the economy probably will be the issue at the center of their Mexico coverage in the coming years.

Other participants, however, such as David Brooks, U.S. Bureau Chief for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, have called into question this limited view of Mexico coverage. They wonder how much space will then be left to devote to other sectors of the Mexican society such as the workers and students; to all of those who lie beyond the bounds of the formal economy, the “invisible Mexicans” who are not reflected in the governmental statistics and who have little or no share in the present economic growth. This is a very relevant issue, since it may well be that the keys to an understanding of tomorrow’s Mexico are now being held firmly in the hands of all of today’s “exceptions.”