

Washington stunned by Mexican vote

by D.E. Pettingell

Thirty-six hours after Mexico's July 6 milestone elections, Washington did not hide its dismay. In a seminar-press conference July 8, representatives of official Washington and top academicians on the payroll of the financial community, showed surprise and concern over the outcome. It represents the beginning of a "new political dynamic" in Mexico, they stated. "The substantial decline in the voting" for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) "appears to be much more than had been anticipated."

Cuahtémoc Cárdenas, presidential candidate for the National Democratic Front, was "demonstrated to be more popular than many people believed," said moderator Susan Kaufman Purcell, director of Latin American affairs at the blue-blood Council on Foreign Relations. Participants included John St. John, director of Mexican Affairs at the State Department, Reps. James Kolbe (R-Ariz.) and Ron Coleman (D-Texas), and the so-called "specialist on Mexican elections" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Delal Baer.

What they are most worried about is the lack of any guarantee that, in its new political geometry, Mexico will continue servicing its foreign debt. "What will the strong showing of Cárdenas mean . . . ? Will it mean that a Salinas administration will be pushed toward a more populist and leftist approach?" asked Representative Kolbe. He was assuming that the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari would be the next President, even before July 13, when he was "officially" proclaimed the winner.

Brushing off Kolbe's concern, the State Department's St. John, although he refused to talk explicitly about the elections, took it for granted that Salinas was the winner. He assured the audience that Salinas can be fully trusted. "It is in Mexico's interest to be responsible," he said, "Salinas will indeed be tougher on negotiating debt rescheduling, but Mexico has been very responsible, perhaps the most responsible country in the hemisphere. I wouldn't look for anything radical."

In CSIS's Baer's opinion, too, Salinas "would be very reluctant to do anything drastic that would jeopardize Mexico's trade credits [since] Salinas has predicated his strategy of growth on the expansion of trade."

But the seminar participants kept asking over and over, what went wrong? While they ostensibly agreed that Mexico was ripe for a "political opening" that would allow more

participation by opposition parties, the nationalist Cárdenas, as opposed to the neo-Nazi National Action Party (PAN), wasn't the opposition they meant. "It is unclear what gave Cárdenas so many votes, whether there has been an ideological turn to the left in Mexico, or whether it was Cárdenas's strong personality, or perhaps the image of his father," Baer wondered. "What is certain is that there has been a change in the psychological climate of the population."

Purcell interrupted Baer to assert that "more than anything else, it's the impact of the economic crisis." The PRI has lost support due to the austerity policies imposed by the administration of President Miguel de la Madrid. "The economic hardship brought about a very large protest vote."

The panelists felt equally insecure about the future of the North American Common Market, an issue on both Republican and Democratic agendas. While Salinas is on record endorsing the idea of economic integration with the United States and Canada, Cárdenas has insisted that Mexico, the weakest partner in the scheme, will be put at a "serious disadvantage." He rejects the proposal as a "way of forcing upon us a greater dependency on the United States economy." And he's right.

Kaufman said she believes that Mexico must first achieve an "open economy" before joining the United States and Canada. She regretted that the strong showing of Cárdenas make it uncertain whether Salinas would be able to continue the savage IMF austerity that would make Mexico more "competitive" on international markets, and therefore more "suitable" for a North American Common Market.

The proposal will continue to be a key item in Mexico-U.S. bilateral relations. Kolbe told the audience that he has co-authored a bill aimed at creating a broad "free zone" along the U.S.-Mexican border. Kolbe's ultimate goal is to impose upon Mexico the drug-ridden Hong Kong "economic" model based on the proliferation of foreign-owned sweat shops (*maquilas*) where the "host" country, in this case Mexico, provides abundant cheap labor. The *maquilas*, which have grown explosively along the Mexican side of the border, is the only sector of the economy (aside from drugs) that has expanded under the de la Madrid administration. Aside from exploiting a couple of million unskilled young Mexicans (as young as 13 years old) at salaries way below the U.S. minimum wage, Mexico gains nothing.

Cárdenas has denounced them as an "invasion not carried out by armies, but silently and peacefully. . . . What we are seeing is an integration of our economy and a good portion of our territory, with the activities and under the domination of the economic interests of the United States."

CSIS's Baer concluded the seminar by proposing that the next administration create a new position: assistant secretary of state for North American affairs, with two deputies, one for Mexico and another for Canada. In other words, Mexico should cease to be part of Ibero-America, and become part of North America!