

U.S.–Mexico Relations: Making the Most of the Bush–Fox Meeting

By George Kourous

Today, U.S. President George W. Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox meet face-to-face in Washington DC, at their second summit since taking office.

The White House has scheduled Bush's first official state dinner to crown the visit and is dressing up the event with pomp, circumstance, and recycled rhetoric about the new era of U.S.-Mexico relations. "The fact [that] this is the first state dinner ought to send signals about our unique relationship," Bush recently told reporters. "To me, it's a way to summarize for the American people that our relationship with Mexico has never been better." [1]

The fact is, however, that the triumphant tone that initially characterized U.S.-Mexico relations under Fox and Bush has been significantly tempered of late.

Real progress has been made on various issues, certainly. Most importantly, the bilateral relationship has maintained a high profile on the foreign policy agendas of both countries, and immigration has been parked near the top of the presidential priority list. Still, it is increasingly evident that in addition to the difficulty of arriving at consensus on migration policy—and then selling that policy to the U.S. Congress—a number of nettlesome issues continue to complicate the relationship, including Mexico's water debt to the United States and a growing batch of binational trade disputes.

The most significant factor at play, however, is the economic slowdown being experienced by both countries. With the economy slumping, the budget surplus disappearing, and conservative Republicans pressuring him to soften his tone, Bush has sought to lower expectations for a new, comprehensive, visionary package of

reforms aimed at regularizing migration in North America.

Faced with this shift, Mexico has toned down its rhetoric, too. In a major downgrade of his discourse, for instance, Fox recently told *The Washington Post* that ironing out a comprehensive migration plan will take "four to six years."

Fox took office preaching the benefits of expanded U.S.-Mexico trade and promised to create 1.4 million new jobs; instead, an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 jobs have been lost, mostly as a result of the economic deceleration in the United States—the market for more than 80% of Mexico's exports. As a result, more and more Mexicans are voicing serious concern about the negative effects that liberalization and free trade has had on their economy. Fox's approval rating, while still high, is down 6% from its zenith, and he is having a difficult time moving his agenda through Congress.

Many of Fox's detractors criticize him for spending too much time on foreign relations, particularly the U.S.-Mexico relationship. Indeed, to a significant extent, Fox is pinning Mexico's future on the creation of a strengthened, united, and coordinated North American community. He can't afford to go home from Washington empty-handed; and speeches, paeans to the Bush-Fox amistad, or photo ops just aren't enough. The prospect for a groundbreaking, detailed proposal coming out of the meeting isn't realistic at this point, either. But Washington still can take a number of steps to maintain the forward momentum of the binational relationship.

Leaving the political hot-potato of legalization aside for the moment, Bush could well make politically palatable moves to regularize future migration from Mexico in a way that reflects

the realities of the NAFTA economy—and sends a strong signal regarding the importance that the United States attaches to its relationship with Mexico.

The easiest option, of course, is to create a substantially larger and fairer temporary worker program—one that does not make visas dependent on a particular employer and that provides participants with real, enforceable labor protections. But such a program can only aspire to be part of the answer. The options offered by a temporary worker program are not going to be appealing to all undocumented workers in the United States, many of whom will instead choose to get paid under the table and stay off government radar screens. Similarly, many employers will prefer to operate outside the system to avoid labor, wage, and housing requirements.

Another manageable commitment the United States can make now is to evaluating raising the quota of visas available for potential Mexican immigrants, especially since the current ceiling clearly does not reflect historic and post-NAFTA integration of the U.S. and Mexican labor markets and

is in fact an incentive for illegal immigration.

Additionally, as a first step toward living up to its June commitment to review its current border policing strategies, the United States could take a cue from Mexico and start building a corps of search-and-rescue employees within the Border Patrol to complement existing staff, and cap hiring of strictly enforcement personnel at current levels.

Beyond giving Fox something substantive to take home and improving the U.S. response to border safety issues, this action would respond to recent reports by the GAO and others that have raised questions regarding the quality of new agents being brought into the Border Patrol as a result of Congress's ill-considered 1996 mandate to triple the agency's ranks.

Recent statements by U.S. officials that the United States is not prepared to engage in any new, significant development programs targeted at Mexico were a disappointment.[2] But Bush can still promise to deepen discussions with Mexico on the issue by explicitly incorporating develop-

ment concerns into the migration working group's agenda. So far, only the U.S. State Department and Justice Department and Mexico's Interior and its Foreign Affairs Ministry have been at the table; other agencies, such as USAID and Mexico's Office for Mexicans Overseas, should be involved.

The window of opportunity may be narrower today that it was six months ago, but it is still open. And while Fox may not be able to take the whole enchilada back to Mexico, the Bush administration can—and should—make sure he carries something home more tangible than tales of being regaled at a black tie White House dinner.

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Notes: [1] Michelle Mittelstadt, "Pressure's On for First State Dinner to Be Done to Perfection," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 4, 2001; [2] Esther Schrader, "Mexican Development Aid Not in the Offing, U.S. Says," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 1, 2001.

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