

Security by Any Other Names Would Smell Sweeter

By Talli Nauman | March 23, 2005

"The Americas This Week" is a weekly column written by IRC Americas Program analysts. Reader responses and comments to this column and other Americas analysis should be sent to: americas@irc-online.org.

Mexican President Vicente Fox speaks some English, as becomes a leader of a nation bordering the world's largest English-speaking nation. For his part, U.S. President George W. Bush speaks some Spanish. The former Texas governor even started an oil company named Arbusto, which he might know is Spanish for Bush. However, the two presidents speak different languages in more ways than one. Let's take the language they use when speaking about security issues—the main subject of the March 23 North American summit with Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin.

For most of Bush's time in the Oval Office, his standard definition for security has been the "global war on terrorism." Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the U.S. president has insisted that other heads of state frame all issues of international relations in terms of combating terrorism. The Fox administration, however, has attempted to define national security mainly in terms of natural resource control, such as the importance of the state-run oil company or of preserving water and woodlands.

Prior to the chiefs' March 23 huddle in Texas, Martin said that Canada wanted no part of the madness of the a continental missile attack system. But let's leave aside for the moment the idiosyncrasies of the U.S.-Canadian part of the summit agenda. That will help us appreciate the utility of casting U.S.-Mexican foreign policy issues in the light of defense against terrorism. For that matter, let's leave aside for the moment pollsters' evidence that Bush constituents say identity theft is their top security issue and that some of Fox's critics deem their northern border air quality and Mexico City garbage heaps among the biggest national threats.

It is difficult take seriously all the talk about terrorism when there's little official alarm about security for the women who are going down to femicide by the hundreds at the border in Juarez-El Paso. The Fox administration has not demonstrated the political will necessary to stop the serial killings, causing more than one Mexican analyst to conclude that the country's top security officials themselves are too involved in the vicious beatings,

rapes, and killings to get down to the business of preventing more. And Bush has said nothing about this grave problem on the U.S. border.

What about the unprecedented mess caused by smugglers and illegal drug gangs blamed for kidnapping and killing dozens of U.S. and Mexican citizens in border cities during past weeks? The Mexican government has responded to the intensifying drug wars with a new wave of busts and prison sieges, and the U.S. State Department has issued warning about traveling in Mexico. But mainly Mexican traffickers and evil-doers are being fingered. Unlike U.S.-based Mara Salvatrucha street gang members, the Mexican subjects have publicized names, such as Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera or suspected Zeta paramilitary and Gulf Cartel leaders Omar Lorméndez Pitalúa, Heriberto Lazcano, and Gregorio Saucedo. As has been the case for decades now, the kingpins who create the narcotics demand and make the big bucks north of the border, generating the violence and addiction, remain faceless. While they are unfettered, any talk of public safety is empty.

And what are the prospects for trade in the context of counterterrorism? Responding to popular protests, the Fox administration hinted that it might ask to renegotiate parts of the North American Free Trade Agreement to protect the endangered livelihoods of subsistence corn growers. But Bush's agenda tends to favor NAFTA modifications to twist the agreement into another tool of U.S. military domination. Aside from the implications for U.S.-Mexico relations, any Bush administration success in this



direction could be used as a model in the U.S. pursuit of its ever-growing portfolio of proposed free trade agreements.

That leaves us with one area in which residents on both sides of the border stand to gain some security benefits from negotiations between Bush and Fox: migration. While Bush frames the issue as part of a scheme to trap al-Qaida operatives sneaking into the United States, he nonetheless entertains visions of polishing up the old guest worker system. With the impending armed vigilante Minuteman Project in defense of U.S. private property threatening to increase migration-related violence beginning April 1, the system's revival offers a welcome escape valve for socioeconomic pressures in Mexico.

It substitutes the perceived menace of illegal immigrants with the promise of temporary laborers who return to their home countries, instead of being virtually coerced into remaining in the United States by current restrictions against their cross-boundary commute. This would strengthen the U.S. economy while providing a stopgap measure for Mexico's rising joblessness. It would not only save the lives of migrants no longer reliant on dangerous human smugglers' routes, but it would save money for taxpayers by relieving stress on the immigration roles.

Many members of the U.S. Congress agree with the guest worker initiative, but it's a political hot potato for them. In contrast, Bush has nothing to lose by fielding it, since he has already won his last term to the highest office in the land.

In the end, it's Bush's top-down vs. Fox's bottom-up approach that creates the gap across which they communicate whenever these two infamous cowboys parley. After all, they can't help it. Bush's country is the undisputed champion of the world. Fox's is no more than another Third World competitor looking for a hand up to the next rung of the ladder the world order dictates.

Like it or not, if anything is to be accomplished, it will be by accepting Bush's language for it. The thing to keep in mind is that regardless of the fashionable terminology of counterterrorism policy, all hopes for effective U.S. migration, trade, human rights, pollution, and drug control policies abroad depend on conducting them in cooperation with affected governments in a way that fosters equitable development.

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Recommended citation:

Talli Nauman, "Security by Any Other Names Would Smell Sweeter," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, March 23, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/columns/amprog/2005/0503summit.html>

Production Information:

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Editor: Tom Barry

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC