Open Borders, Broken Water: The Nixon Administration and U.S.-Mexican Relations During the Cold War

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On the evening of June 14, 1972, Mexican President Luis Echeverría Alvarez arrived in the United States to begin a six-day official visit that would include meetings at the White House, an address before Congress, and speeches in prominent Mexican-American communities around the country.[1] In his first meeting with Echeverría the following day, U.S. President Richard M. Nixon opened the conversation by referencing his own trip to Moscow in May of that year. Speaking through an interpreter in the Oval Office, Nixon told Echeverría that he viewed their meeting as particularly appropriate given that it so closely followed his discussions in the Soviet Union. Nixon affirmed the importance of demonstrating to the world how "very closely" the two countries consulted with each other and assured the Mexican president that the U.S. only established such close communications with a select group of countries.[2]

[1] Benjamin Welles, "Mexican Chief Asks Change in Relations with U.S.," *New York Times*, June 16, 1972, 1.

[2] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Conversation Among President Nixon, President Echeverría, and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, June 15, 1972*, ed. Edward C. Keefer, Douglas Kraft, and James F. Siekmeier, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 482, (Washington DC: GPO, 2009),

Despite this gracious opening, Nixon offered a different view later that evening in a phone conversation with his close White House aide, H.R. Haldeman. In contrast to his earlier comments, Nixon complained that after historic meetings in Beijing and Moscow, it was "really terribly difficult to deal with even a country as important as Mexico." [3] He reasoned that some countries mattered in the world and some did not, insinuating that it remained difficult to view Mexico as one of the former, especially after "you spend the whole damn day" talking about the salinity of the Colorado River.[4] This contrast exemplifies the Nixon Administration's approach to the nations of Latin America. While recognizing the importance of hemispheric affairs to the larger Cold War, Nixon and others in his administration could hardly bother to take any real interest in the region.

The relationship between the United States and Latin America remains a recurring subject of scholarly study and debate. Early works written since the Second World War argued for the compatibility of U.S. and Latin American interests, judging U.S. action in the region as largely benevolent and minimizing instances of conflict.[5] Beginning in the 1960s, New Left historians and Dependency theorists began to challenge this idealistic view, instead offering a highly critical interpretation of U.S. motives and actions.[6] In contrast to previous works, this

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http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d482 (accessed March 10, 2013).

[3] H.R. Haldeman and Richard Nixon, "Conversation No. 736-2: Cassette No. 2253," (transcript, Oval Office, Washington, DC, June 15, 1972), http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB95/mex29.pdf (accessed March 10, 2013).

[4] Haldeman and Nixon.

[5] Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1943); Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Western Hemisphere Idea: Its Rise and Decline* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954).

[6] Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal*

body of scholarship defined the U.S. relationship with Latin America as one of regional hegemony marked by exploitative and aggressive policies. The continued prevalence of the revisionist view reflects a scholarly consensus in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations.[7] Yet, more recent work complicates this critical view without necessarily overturning it. Challenging the perspective of total U.S. hegemony, recent research shows that Latin Americans exercised greater agency than previously thought.[8] Especially found in recent studies of U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War, this scholarship better illuminates the internal dynamics of post-war Latin America, increasingly explores local and cultural manifestations of the global conflict, and even showcases how Latin American actors directed events alongside their U.S. counterparts.[9]

Diplomacy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); David Green, *The Containment of Latin America: A History of the Myths and Realities of the Good Neighbor Policy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S. Latin American Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Lars Schoulz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century: U.S.-Latin American Relations Since 1889* (Washington: Scholarly Resources, 2000).

[7] Mark T. Gilderhus, "An Emerging Synthesis? U.S.-Latin American Relations since the Second World War," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 3 (1992): 429-452.

[8] Max Paul Friedman, "Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (2003): 621-636.

[9] Kyle Longley, *The Sparrow and the Hawk: Costa Rica and the United States During the Rise of José Figueres* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

For those studying U.S.-Mexican relations, particularly during the presidency of Richard Nixon, this shift in scholarly emphasis slowly arrived. Although recent studies provide a more balanced assessment of the Nixon Administration's foreign policy, they generally limit their treatment of Latin America to a few notable crises framed as unwanted incursions into the administration's focus on Europe and Asia.[10] A different group of recent studies looks more closely at the Cold War in Latin America, showing how the Nixon Administration's policies did not simply respond to brief moments of crises but instead reflected the influence of distinct regional trends that sometimes converged and sometimes diverged from the conflict between East and West during the era of détente.[11] While these works broaden and complicate the studies focused more narrowly on the ideological worldview of Nixon Administration officials, their emphasis on larger regional trends ignores the Cold War's impact on local concerns. By considering issues outside of the security concerns that often took precedence in the Cold War, one can better understand how domestic and international relationships often crossed paths with each other during this period as well as how the concerns of not only elites, but also ordinary citizens shaped and affected that process at the local level. Examining documents from the White House, State Department, and newspapers can provide a better understanding of how different officials with competing concerns responded to

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[10] Jussi M. Hahnimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners In Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

[11] Christopher M. White, *Creating A Third World: Mexico, Cuba, and the United States during the Castro Era* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Hal Brands, "Third World Politics in an Age of Global Turmoil: The Latin American Challenge to U.S. and Western Hegemony, 1965–1975," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 1 (January 2008): 105-138; Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

the complex issues that appeared. While restricting the study to U.S. sources provides a limited view of events, a careful reading can offer insight into other actors as well.

Negotiations between the United States and Mexico over drug control and natural resources provide a useful path into the nature of the Nixon Administration's relationship with Mexico during the Cold War. The close proximity of the two countries as well as Mexico's leading role in the hemisphere created a context in which local issues like narcotics trafficking and water pollution could easily interact with each nation's regional and global concerns. Although under domestic pressure on both issues, the U.S. alternatively adopted a more aggressive or more conciliatory position in its negotiations with Mexico. For its part, Mexico also assumed a varied position, sometimes seeking only to affirm good relations with the U.S. and other times aiming to position itself as a willing challenger to the northern colossus. In both cases, local actors played a significant role in shaping these positions as did larger shifts in the regional and global balance of power. Ultimately, how each country understood and interacted with these competing influences entailed how they negotiated over and eventually resolved these difficult issues. In the changing dynamics of the Cold War in Latin America, the hegemony of the United States as well as the dependency of Mexico was rarely assured.

Upon assuming the presidency in January 1969, Richard Nixon encountered a Latin America restless with the failure of U.S. policies to bring any meaningful political or economic development to the region. Embodied by the Alliance for Progress program, the idealism advanced by the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations during the 1960s produced few concrete results for the majority of Latin Americans. [12]

[12] Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 142-162; Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 148-172; Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 69-108.

Consequently, the Nixon administration faced widespread dissatisfaction with U.S. policies, exemplified by growing anti-U.S. sentiment, nationalist self-assertion, and calls for a more just relationship between the United States and its southern neighbors. The Nixon Administration responded to this context by developing a far less ambitious approach than its predecessors. Unveiling his administration's plan for the region in a speech to the Inter-American Press Agency in October 1969, Nixon promised Latin America a more equitable relationship with the United States, but offered few concrete proposals outside of liberalizing the terms of economic aid and investment.[13] In keeping with this program, the administration directed its initial efforts toward maintaining a low profile and ensuring stability in the region. These goals took the form of continued economic aid and attempts to develop closer ties with right-wing military governments.[14]

The administration's disinterested policy quickly proved ineffectual, however, as it failed to account for a general shift underway in the inter-American system. International issues such

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[13] Richard Nixon, "424 - Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the Inter American Press Association" (speech, Washington Hilton Hotel, Washington DC, October 31, 1969), http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2302 (accessed March 10, 2013); Recent work by Hal Brands has shown even Nixon's economic prescriptions largely failed to materialize. See: Hal Brands, "Economic Development and the Contours of U.S. Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration's Approach to Latin America, 1969-1974," *Peace & Change* 33, no. 2, (April 2008): 243-273.

[14] Mark Atwood Lawrence, "History from Below: The United States and Latin America in the Nixon Years," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977*, ed. Frederik Logevall and Andrew Preston, 269-288 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 269-274; Alan McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2006): 74-75; Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 114-120.

as U.S. failures in Vietnam, the relaxing of tensions with China and the Soviet Union, the end of the Bretton Woods system, and the 1973 oil crisis had important ramifications in Latin America. Viewing these events as indications of a U.S. decline, Latin American leaders attempted to construct a new hemispheric framework that would challenge the previous pattern of U.S. dominance in the region. To this end, they attempted to form more relationships with other nations, forge greater regional solidarity through political and economic cooperation, and advocated for the Third World as an organizing principle apart from the Cold War contest between the United States and Soviet Union.[15] Considering the potential impact this shift portended for U.S. power in the rest of the world, the Nixon Administration quickly recognized the need to develop a more active policy in the region and regain its footing in an area long considered its primary sphere of influence. Without abandoning its low profile, the administration began to take greater steps to counter the rising tide of anti-U.S. action and rebuild its depleted influence. These shifting regional dynamics provide an important context to understand the varying ways the Nixon Administration conducted relations with Mexico during this period.[16]

Part of a larger effort to ensure domestic support for his new administration, Nixon addressed the rise of illegal drug use in the United States by launching a unilateral action against illegal trafficking along the U.S.-Mexico border. Named Operation Intercept, this action resulted in significant protest from both sides of the border as crossing delays inconvenienced tourists and disrupted local economies. The issue proved particularly damaging to U.S.-Mexican relations as both the Mexican government and public opinion decried the perceived attack on the nation's sovereignty and national honor. Responding to this negative reaction, the Nixon Administration quickly convened a series of bilateral talks aimed at tempering Mexican anger. Although the talks ended with gains for both sides, the action had a lasting effect on U.S.-Mexican relations during a time of increased sensitivity to U.S. power in the region.

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[15] Hal Brands, "Third World Politics," 106.
[16] Harmer, 1-19.

Running on a platform of law and order, Nixon quickly took steps to deliver on his campaign promises once in office and seized on the issue of rising drug use as a solution. Illegal narcotics presented a means of untangling a web of related social issues such as rising street crime, student unrest on college campuses, and congressional criticism of the Vietnam War due to a heroin epidemic among American GI's.[17] Yet, despite the seeming growth in drug-related social problems, public opinion polls reported that illegal narcotics remained low on the list of issues important to many Americans.[18] Nevertheless, the Nixon Administration used illegal narcotics as a kind of keystone to rest a larger critique of 1960s social upheaval, exemplified by widespread protests against the Vietnam War and a highly-visible youth culture. As Daniel Weimer has argued, Nixon employed a "drugs-as-a-disease" metaphor in his rhetoric to reach the "silent majority" constituency he cultivated during the 1968 presidential race. Recognizing their desire for greater law and order, the Nixon Administration framed its anti-drug campaign as a way to quell social unrest and ensure the overall well-being of American society.[19]

An inter-departmental task force convened by Nixon early in his presidency provided the necessary foundation for this policy in a report submitted to the present on June 3, 1969. The report argued that illegal drug use marked “one of the most serious problems facing the United States” and that one of its “most alarming aspects” owed to the growing “involvement of

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[17] David F. Musto, *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control*, 3rd ed. expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 247-257; Daniel Weimer, *Seeing Drugs: Modernization, Counterinsurgency, and U.S. Narcotics Control in the Third World, 1969-1976* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2011), 50-84.

[18] David F. Musto and Pamela Korsmeyer, *The Quest for Drug Control: Politics and Federal Policy in a Period of Increasing Substance Abuse, 1963—1981* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 39.

[19] Weimer, 82-83.

young people."[20] In a message to Congress just over a month later, Nixon used the report's findings to publicize the administration's stance on the matter. In his speech, Nixon declared that illegal drug use posed "a serious national threat" to the health and safety of Americans and thus required greater national awareness and federal action.[21] Following on his pronouncements, the Nixon Administration significantly expanded the federal government's role in combating illegal narcotics. In forming the main pillars of this program, the administration developed new approaches in the areas of law enforcement, medical treatment, and foreign policy.[22] This latter area proved most important to the conduct of U.S.-Mexican relations during this period as border interdiction and foreign source control became central components of the administration's new anti-drug campaign.

While much of the administration's anti-drug foreign policy revolved around ending the infamous "French Connection," early efforts aimed at addressing drug traffic that moved across the U.S.-Mexican border.[23] The June *Task Force Report* placed particular emphasis on this issue, arguing that most of the drugs arriving in the U.S. either originated or traveled through Mexico. Indeed, the report went so far as to blame this cross-border traffic for the nations rising drug use.[24]

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[20] Task Force Report; Narcotics, Marihuana & Dangerous Drugs; 6 June 1969; Folder "Operation Intercept [1 of 2]"; Box 49; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[21] Speech; To the Congress of the United States-Richard Nixon; 14 July 1969; Folder "[EX] HE 5-1 7-1-69-12-31-69"; Box 17; Subject Files: HE (Health); White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[22] Musto and Korsmeyer, 42.

[23] See: Musto, 271. The French Connection referred to the process by which Turkish opium was brought to France, refined into heroin, and then smuggled into the United States.

[24] Task Force Report; Narcotics, Marihuana & Dangerous Drugs; 6 June 1969.

Consequently, the report recommended the State Department take serious steps to pressure the Mexican government into action, arguing that drug trafficking affected the "vital interests of the nation" and that nothing in the department's dealings with Mexico should receive "higher priority or greater emphasis."[25] The internal discussion of the report suggests that this analysis directed subsequent administration thinking on the matter. In a memo to Nixon, presidential adviser John D. Ehrlichman described the report as recommending the Mexican government "be forced into" a program of crop eradication and increased border control.[26] Moreover, a memo from Nixon to departmental heads affirmed the report's conclusions and commissioned an Action Task Force aimed at making "a frontal attack" on the illegal traffic coming across the border.[27] This directive eventually took the form of Operation Intercept, a massive interdiction effort conducted along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border with the goal of stemming the flow of drugs from Mexico. The action clearly emerged from the same ideas that shaped the administration's whole range of anti-drug policies, though it eventually proved more applicable to the domestic context of the United States than to the relationship with Mexico during this period.

Just as Nixon began the first year of his presidential term amidst widespread social upheaval, Mexican President Gustavo

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[25] Task Force Report; Narcotics, Marihuana & Dangerous Drugs; 6 June 1969.

[26] Memo; John D. Ehrlichman to President Nixon; 18 June 1969; Folder "EX FG 221-28 Narcotics, Marijuana and Dangerous Drugs [1969-70]"; Box 5; FG (Federal Government—Organizations); Subject Files; White House Central Files:; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[27] Memo; President Nixon to Rogers, Kennedy, Laird, Mitchell, Hardin, Stans, Finch, Volpe, Kunzig; 27 June 1969; Folder "EX FG 221-28 Narcotics, Marijauna and Dangerous Drugs [1969-70]"; Box 5; FG (Federal Government—Organizations); Subject Files; White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Díaz Ordaz began his final year in office facing similar difficulties. In Mexico, the end of the 1960s brought some of the most serious social challenges since the era of the Revolution earlier in the century. Massive student protests criticized the authoritarianism of Mexico's political system while the long-successful economic policy of stabilizing development began to falter. The effects of these developments laid bare the growing social chasm created by decades of rapid social change coupled with the rigidity of Mexico's social institutions. In the face of these social fissures, Díaz Ordaz exhibited an unwavering determination to preserve the integrity of the Mexican system. The repressive measures he adopted to quell the uprisings of 1968, culminating in the massacre of protesters at Tlatelolco, offered one of the most visible manifestations of this approach.[28] In the area of foreign policy, Díaz Ordaz expressed relatively little interest outside of economic matters but prided himself on maintaining a cordial relationship with the U.S. under President Lyndon Johnson.[29] Despite some instances of conflict, such as Mexico's refusal to support the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic, the two presidents's frequent consultations seemingly

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[28] John W. Sherman, "The Mexican 'Miracle' and Its Collapse," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, ed. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley, 537-568 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 598-602; Héctor Aguilar Camín & Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 199-202; Peter H. Smith, "Mexico since 1946," in *Latin America since 1930: Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean*, ed. Leslie Bethell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 117-124.

[29] Document 5: c. September 5, 1969, [*Your Meeting with Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz*], White House, secret memorandum, appended to Kate Doyle, "Operation Intercept: The Perils of Unilateralism," National Security Archive, George Washington University, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB86/ (accessed March 23, 2013).

confirmed the existence of a special relationship between their countries.[30]

The Nixon Administration gave no outward suggestion that it intended to alter this close relationship. A September 8 meeting with Díaz Ordaz at the dedication of the joint-constructed Amistad Damn in El Mirador, Mexico provided an early opportunity for Nixon to affirm his administration's interest in the region and lay the groundwork for the announcement of its official Latin American policy later in the year. In a briefing memo, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger presented the meeting as an important opportunity for Nixon to demonstrate not only the administration's attentiveness in maintaining a special relationship with Latin America, but also the President's personal interest in establishing a close relationship with his Mexican counterpart.[31] The importance of illegal narcotics in the U.S. featured as one of the many topics discussed at the meeting between the two presidents, though Nixon made no mention of the impending Operation Intercept.[32] While the meeting may have succeeded in affirming the importance of U.S.-Mexican relations, the Nixon Administration's decision not to discuss the border campaign illustrates that close consultation, at least in the area of illegal narcotics, remained elusive.

Although chiefly aimed at winning domestic support, the Nixon Administration's plan to pressure Mexico into taking greater action against drug trafficking, fit into a longer history of U.S. dissatisfaction with Mexican efforts. While the Mexican government conducted intermittent anti-drug actions throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, tensions between the United States and Mexico over the Mexican Revolution as well

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[30] White, 113; Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *The United State and Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 179-182.

[31] Document 5, Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

[32] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Memoranda of Meetings, El Mirador, Mexico (Amistad Dam), September 8, 1969*. Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 436, (Washington DC: 1969), http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d436 (accessed March 13, 2013).

as differing cultural attitudes about drug use kept the issue from assuming any real importance for the Mexican government in its relations with the United States. This changed somewhat following World War II as Latin American countries began to devote more attention to the issue of illegal drugs.[33] Reflective of this trend, Mexico's launched its *La gran campaña* in 1948, the first official campaign against marijuana and opium cultivation in the country. However, issues such as the remote location of growers, the lack of necessary technologies like aircraft and herbicides, and forceful resistance prevented Mexican officials from making any significant progress.[34] Moreover, the Mexican government continued to resist entering into a formal bilateral program with United States. While devoting more attention to drug cultivation, the Mexican government did not want to admit any responsibility for the drug problem in the United States or suggest a lack of effort on their part.[35] In addition, the issue of Mexican sovereignty seems to have also produced a reluctance to engage in anything beyond informal discussions.[36] Consequently, narcotics continued to flow into the U.S. in the following decades despite small increases in Mexican efforts after receiving technical assistance from the United States.[37] Although this earlier history demonstrates how Operation Intercept fit into a longer pattern of U.S.-Mexican relations over illegal narcotics, the administration clearly misunderstood how this history would unfold within the larger context of U.S.-Latin American relations in the late 1960s.

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[33] William O. Walker III, *Drug Control in the Americas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 153-179.

[34] Richard B. Craig, "La Campaña Permanente: Mexico's Antidrug Campaign," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 20 (1978): 108-109.

[35] Document 5, Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

[36] Letter; John D. Ehrlichman to Kenneth Hahn; 4 November 1969; Folder "450-A--OA# 2906 [Operation Intercept]"; Box 60; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[37] Craig, "La Campaña Permanente," 109.

The failure of the Nixon Administration to adequately judge Operation Intercept's potential negative effect on U.S.-Mexican relations influenced the action's development from the very beginning. This is due in large part to the absence of State Department input on not only Operation Intercept, but also the issue of illegal drugs in general. The *Task Force Report* provides early indication of this coordination failure. While the report featured input from numerous government agencies, the State Department assumed only an advisory role and therefore remained isolated from the process. Adding to this, State concerns over the action voiced in the days leading up to its official launch fell on deaf ears. Following several press leaks of the operation's details, Secretary of State William P. Rogers cabled Ambassador to Mexico William H. McBride on September 11 and expressed concern about the action's potential damage to U.S. "credibility" and "reputation for good faith" with the Mexican government.[38] A September 19 telegram from McBride indicates these concerns did not diminish in the following days as McBride reported that the action "may well have catastrophic consequences" on U.S. relations with Mexico.[39] Unfortunately for the Nixon Administration, these early warnings had no effect on the nature of the operation. The State Department's lack of influence in the days leading up to the action's launch indicates a significant gap existed between the White House officials concerned with ensuring Nixon's domestic

[38] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Telegram 153621 From the Department of State to the Embassy in Mexico, September 11, 1969, 0044Z*, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 438, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d438 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[39] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Telegram 5122 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, September 19, 1969, 1836Z*, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 441, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d441 (accessed March 10, 2013).

support and those officials forced to handle the policy's diplomatic consequences inside Mexico.

The State Department's early warnings quickly proved accurate once Operation Intercept officially began on September 21, 1969. To increase interdiction of illegal drug trafficking, several federal agencies coordinated efforts to halt the movement of all drugs whether by land, sea or air. In particular, huge numbers of additional agents stationed themselves at the various crossing points along the U.S.-Mexico border to engage in a total search of all foot and vehicle traffic. By design, this action produced significant delays at crossings and elicited strong protest from those affected. Initial complaints centered on the inconvenience for vehicles created by the increased searches.[40] Soon, Mexican businesses along the border joined the chorus of disapproval as delays disrupted cross-border traffic and significantly depressed their earnings.[41] White House officials involved in planning the action recognized the likelihood of these results but deemed the need to take action against illegal narcotics more important. In a September memo to Nixon, an administration official acknowledged that complaints from tourists and businesses would likely follow the campaign's launch, but that the drug war theme "has such power" that the action would "be widely applauded by the public."[42] Indeed, the effect on Mexican businesses appears to have been an intentional component of the overall plan to pressure the Mexican government into taking greater action against illegal narcotics.[43]

Despite the Nixon Administration's recognition that Operation Intercept would produce complaints, only the members of the State Department foresaw the action's full ramifications. While the White House anticipated anger along

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[40] William J. Drummond, "Autos and Tempers Boil Over at Check," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1969, 20.

[41] Francis B. Kent, "Mexico Storm Rages on Operation Intercept," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1969, A1.

[42] Memo; Herbert G. Klein to President Nixon; 13 September 1969; Folder "[EX] HE 5-1 7-1-69-12-31-69"; Box 17; Subject Files: HE (Health); White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[43] Craig, "Operation Intercept," 578.

the border, the action quickly escalated to a national issue in Mexico over the nature of its relationship with the United States. A September 30 memo to Kissinger reported that since the launch date "public uproar in Mexico has become increasingly stronger … and the issue is becoming a hot one publicly throughout Mexico." [44] Protests both from the Mexican government and public opinion emphasized the nation's traditional independence and the supposed special relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. These criticisms drew on the growing nationalism and anti-U.S. sentiment spreading across Latin America at the end of the 1960s. Indeed, official reports of Mexican reaction confirm this larger significance. An October 2 memo from the State Department reported that the "negative reactions from the Mexican President and press are stronger than expected," and that the department believes "Mexican anger will continue as long as the Mexicans do not receive what they consider courteous treatment as equals." [45] Beyond this, the report argued that Mexican public opinion viewed Operation Intercept as part of a long history of U.S. hegemony in Latin America, considering it "another harassment from the powerful northern neighbor."[46] U.S. press accounts similarly affirm that Mexican anger resulted not only from inconvenience at the border, but also the larger issue of the U.S.-Mexican

[44] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Memorandum From Viron P. Vaky of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, September 30, 1969*, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 442, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d442 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[45] Memo; Chris G. Petrow to Richard Kleindienst; 2 October 1969; Folder "Report to the President on OPERATION INTERCEPT, 10-13-69"; Box 53; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[46] Memo; Petrow to Kleindienst; 2 October 1969.

relationship.[47] These reports provide additional evidence of the extent to which the domestic orientation of the action ignored the fraught relationship between the U.S. and Latin America during this period. The official Mexican protests that followed on the eruption of public anger further suggest the administration's failure to recognize the tense diplomatic climate.

Largely mirroring the sentiments of the Mexican public, official protests from the Mexican government cited the damage caused to the special relationship and the infringement on Mexican sovereignty as their chief grievances over Operation Intercept. The memo to Kissinger mentioned above noted that in complaints to Secretary of State Rogers, Mexican Foreign Secretary Carillo Flores "particularly decried the lack of consultation" prior to Operation Intercept's launch. Moreover, the memo reported that in his toast at an official luncheon for U.S. Astronauts in Mexico City, President Díaz Ordaz described the action as "a 'somber curtain' marring [bilateral] relations."[48] Perhaps most dramatically, Flores sent a personal letter to Nixon on September 30 which communicated the frustration of the Mexican public and the desperate need for the United States to alter its campaign. Flores wrote that the Mexican people could not understand why "the most drastic, and for many, unfriendly measure against Mexico" occurred so shortly after the successful meeting of the two nation's presidents at the Amistad Dam.[49] Moreover, he called on Nixon to review Operation Intercept and "order its excesses be corrected."[50] Addressing the letter in a memo to Nixon, Kissinger described it as "an unusual step" that

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[47] "Mexicans Indignant at U.S. Drug Drive," *New York Times*, September 18, 1969, 102; Juan de Onis, "Drug Watch on Mexico Adding to Latin Disillusion with Nixon," *New York Times*, October 8, 1969, 17.

[48] Memo from Vaky to Kissinger, September 30, 1969.

[49] Document 10: c. September 30, 1969, *[Antonio Carillo Flores to* Nixon], Secretariat of Foreign Relations, personal letter, Kate Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

[50] Document 10, Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

indicated "the intensity of the Mexican feeling."[51] In light of the operation's effects and the general climate surrounding U.S.-Latin American relations, the protests of the Mexican public and government officials are unsurprising. However, significant criticism of the action also came from domestic sources, including certain segments of the U.S. government.

The most damning indictments of Operation Intercept domestically originated within the Nixon Administration itself. Following the launch date, the State Department's earlier skepticism hardened into direct criticism. The above cited memo argued that the action "damaged and is continuing to damage [U.S.] relations with Mexico."[52] Moreover, it posited that if the Mexican government's hostility continued, it "may well affect U.S.-Mexican relations in areas unrelated to narcotics control."[53] A paper from the Budget Bureau offered a particularly critical assessment of both the action and the *Task Force Report* that lead to it. The paper described the report as providing "a grossly inadequate basis" for crafting the border program and argued that it would likely damage relations with Mexico much more than anticipated.[54] Moreover, the paper contended that the report's recommendations may "result in embarrassment to the President" by presenting him as unable to effectively manage the drug issue.[55] In addition to these internal criticisms, individuals outside the administration offered their own negative assessments of the operation. A state senator from California argued that the program had resulted in no more than traffic jams while a Democratic representative, also from California, described it as an inadequate solution to America's larger drug

[51] Document 12: c. October 5, 1969, *Letter to you from Mexican Foreign Minister on Operation Intercept*, White House, memorandum, Kate Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

[52] Memo; Petrow to Kleindienst; 2 October 1969.

[53] Memo; Petrow to Kleindienst; 2 October 1969.

[54] Document 9: September 29, 1969, *[Budget Bureau Comments on Marijuana Policy]*, White House, memorandum, Kate Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

[55] Document 9, Doyle, "Operation Intercept."

problem.[56] A particularly critical radio broadcast from the border town of Laredo Texas described the campaign as an "ill-conceived police state strategy" while an article from the *Los Angeles Times* reported the action as "clumsy, hostile, divisive and aggressive."[57]

This domestic criticism coupled with protests from Mexico motivated the administration to address the fallout from Operation Intercept through diplomatic overtures to the Mexican government. Following a series of meetings with Mexican delegates in Washington, the Nixon Administration dispatched a joint U.S.-Mexican communique on October 10, 1969. The communique signaled the administration's attempt to mollify Mexican officials and public opinion as it asserted the desire in the United States to "maintain at the highest levels of friendship, understanding, and mutual respect its relations with Mexico."[58] Furthermore, it reported that the program's name would change from Operation Intercept to Operation Cooperation and that officials of the two governments would again discuss the issue in Mexico City later that month. The conciliatory language employed in the joint communique suggests recognition in the administration of the action's damaging effects on U.S.-Mexican relations and the need to correct the situation.

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[56] "Wedworth Calls Main Result of 'Intercept' a Huge Border Snarl," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1969, CS3; "Drug Searches Not Adequate, Tunney Says," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1969, 30.

[57] Transcript; "The Streets of Laredo"; Radio Station KVOZ, 1 October 1969; Memo; Folder "[EX] HE 5-1 7-1-69-12-31-69"; Box 17; White House Central Files: Subject Files: HE (Health); Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California; Francis B. Kent, "U.S., Mexico Open New Parley on Dope War," *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1969, 22.

[58] Joint Communique; Fourth Draft of Proposed Communique; 9 October 1969; Folder "450-A--OA# 2906 [Operation Intercept]"; Box 60; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

The conciliatory stance reflected in the communique did not necessarily reflect unanimity within the administration nor did it engender a meaningful change in the operation's daily conduct. While the joint communique may have reflected the sentiments of the State Department, other members of the Nixon Administration would only abandon their support of the operation in exchange for official Mexican commitments to undertake greater anti-drug efforts. A *New York Times* article reported that although the communique reflected an administrative triumph for the State Department, members of the Departments of Justice and Treasury were "too sick to talk about it."[59] A memo from Treasury Secretary David M. Kennedy sent to Nixon on the same day of the communique's release confirms this account. In the memo, Kennedy commented that the Treasury Department sees "a real danger" in the communique as it might present the idea that the administration has, "under Latin American pressure," retreated from its attempts to stop the flow of drugs across the border.[60] Kennedy's concerns appear unfounded, however, as the conduct of the operation underwent no significant change. Although the communique claimed that the U.S. would ease restrictions at the border in the days following the announcement, extensive searches at crossings sites continued in many areas.[61]

Although complaints persisted at the border, government officials effectively resolved the dispute over Operation Intercept in their second round of talks held in Mexico City. Following three days of meetings, U.S. and Mexican delegates issued a joint deceleration on October 30, 1969 that affirmed their earlier agreement to change the operation's name and relax border

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[59] Felix Belair Jr., "U.S. Bows to Mexican Demands; Drug Smuggling Drive Is Eased," *New York Times*, October 11, 1969, 1.

[60] Memo; David M. Kennedy to John D. Ehrlichman; 10 October 1969; Folder "450-A--OA# 2906 [Operation Intercept]"; Box 60; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[61] William Endicott, "Dope Check Now Called Operation Confusion," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1969.

restrictions. Moreover, the meeting created an official mechanism in the form of annual consultations through which the U.S. and Mexico could better cooperate on anti-drug efforts. Crucially for Mexico, the declaration emphasized that future cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico would take place with "respect for the dignity and sovereignty" of each country and that Mexican actions against illegal drugs would continue solely under their direction.[62] The meetings also satisfied the most hardened of Nixon Administration officials by establishing a formal context for the two nations to work against illegal narcotics as well as gaining a commitment from Mexico to take greater action in the future.[63] Nixon even sent a letter to President Díaz Ordaz following the talks apologizing for Operation's negative effects.[64] In the years following, the Mexican government increasingly acknowledged the problem of drug use among its own population and conducted greater efforts at interdiction and crop eradication. Moreover, these efforts featured greater U.S. participation in the form of equipment and technical training.[65] Nevertheless, the economic effect on the border and the resentment among the Mexican public persisted despite greater cooperation on anti-drug efforts.[66] Ultimately,

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[62] Joint Declaration; Joint Declaration of the United States and Mexican Delegations; 30 October 1969; Folder "Conference in Mexico, October 27-31 [1969]"; Box 31; Egil Krogh; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[63] "U.S. and Mexico Map Joint Drugs Drive," *New York Times*, October 31, 1969, 9.

[64] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Letter From President Nixon to President Díaz Ordaz of Mexico, Washington, November 18, 1969*, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 445, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d445 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[65] Craig, "La Campaña Permanente," 110; Weimer, 180.

[66] "Business Still Off in Tijuana," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1969, A3; Francis B. Kent, "Mexicans Still Resent Operation Intercept," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1969, 3.

Operation Intercept produced the Nixon Administration's desired results, but also significantly damaged any notion of a special relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.

After the resolution of Operation Intercept, rising salinity in the Colorado River became the chief problem in U.S.-Mexican relations. A long-standing issue for the two nations, the Nixon Administration attempted to develop a definitive solution to the situation during its tenure. This task proved particularly troublesome because of the new Mexican government's aggressive approach as well as concerted pressure from U.S. states who also held an interest in the river's water resources. Nevertheless, the demands of the Mexican government as well as the Mexican public ultimately prevailed over domestic interests in the United States. Particularly motivated by Mexico's threats of international arbitration, the Nixon Administration took steps to address the issue in order to maintain good relations with Mexico and avoid any damage to the United States's image in the world. Eventually reaching an agreement that favored Mexico, the Nixon Administration showed more concern than in previous years for its relationship with Latin America and the effect that relationship could have on policy goals.

Unlike the problems of Operation Intercept, the Nixon Administration inherited the salinity crisis from previous U.S. administrations. After a period of tense negotiations, the United States and Mexico reached an agreement in February 1944 which stipulated that Mexico would receive 1.5 million acre-feet of water from the Colorado River. In 1961, problems arose with this agreement due to the pumping of high-saline water from the recently constructed Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District near Yuma, Arizona. Following Mexican protests over the resulting reduction in water quality, the two nations reached a five-year agreement in 1965 to alleviate the problem through a dual program of water substitution and alternative pumping techniques. As the agreement would have expired in 1970, the U.S. offered Mexico a further five-year plan to address the issue in late 1969. While this plan satisfied the government of Díaz Ordaz, the Mexican president left the final decision to his successor, Luis Echeverría Alvarez. For its part, the Echeverría Administration rejected further offers of a permanent solution

and instead accepted only one-year extensions in the hope of achieving a better final settlement.[67] The difficulty of the U.S. to reach an agreement with Mexico on the salinity issue owed much to the changing dynamics of the Cold War in Latin America as well as the contours of Mexico's internal situation.

Adding to the general Latin American move to challenge U.S. dominance, the election of socialist candidate Salvador Allende to the Chilean presidency in 1970 made clear the Nixon Administration's urgent need to reformulate its approach to the Southern Hemisphere. In particular, the administration's view of Allende as the next Fidel Castro pressed upon them the necessity of establishing stronger ties with like-minded nations to counter the potential influence of Chilean leadership in the region.[68] Mexico's close proximity and growing economic integration with the United States following World War II made it a prime candidate for this goal. Although Mexico long-stressed its independence from the United States in foreign affairs, Mexico's influential position in Latin America proved more important for the administration. Indeed, Kissinger argued that nationalist countries like Mexico would make fine allies as long as they remained non-Marxist.[69] Indicative of this changing policy, Nixon encouraged Echeverría at their White House meeting in June 1972 to let his voice, "rather than the voice of Castro be the voice of Latin America."[70] For his part, Echeverría appeared more than willing to assume this role.

Taking office after the serious internal strains that occurred in Mexico at the end of the 1960s, Echeverría directed much of his presidency toward restoring domestic support for the Mexican political system. In contrast to the resigned personality of his predecessor, Echeverría employed a populist rhetoric and

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[67] Norris Hundley, Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Evan R. Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

[68] Lawrence, 278-279; Harmer, 8-9.

[69] Harmer, 165.

[70] Transcript 27, Kate Doyle, "The Nixon Tapes."

high-profile governing style. In his time as President, he traveled frequently around the country meeting with ordinary Mexicans and similarly conducted well-publicized visits with foreign governments around the globe. Drawing on the rising nationalism of Latin America and the global Non-Aligned Movement, Echeverría adopted a policy of a *tercemundismo* that connected Mexico with the other nation's efforts to shift relations away from the powers of the Global North and forge greater solidarity among nations of the Third World. While he may have pledged to support the U.S. against the leftist forces in Latin America, his populist and nationalist globalism presented a different image on the world stage.[71] With the issue of rising salinity in the Colorado River, the contrast between the Nixon Administration's growing desire to secure friendly allies like Mexico and the Echeverría Administration's goal of ensuring domestic support through a strengthened nationalism came into sharp relief.

Indicative of the United States's and Mexico's changing relationship, the Echeverría Administration demonstrated a willingness to adopt more stringent criteria for settling the salinity dispute and engage U.S. officials in a more forceful manner throughout negotiations. Although Mexican officials often professed their desire to work with the U.S. toward reaching a definitive solution on the issue, numerous reports from the Nixon Administration indicate the difficulty of negotiating with the Echeverría Administration in contrast to its predecessor. A report detailing the Mexican position on rising salinity drafted just days before the June meeting between the two presidents provides a prime example of this tense environment. The report argued that despite significant domestic pressures in Mexico, Echeverría's "[A]dministration, much more than its immediate predecessors, has consciously agitated the problem … presumably to bring added pressure" on the U.S. to reach a settlement.[72] An inter-departmental task force report on

[71] Sherman, 602-607; Camín and Aguilar, *Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, 203-209; Smith, "Mexico since 1946," 124-132.

[72] Report; The Mexican Position; 10 June 1972; Folder "Colorado River Salinity, 1972 [From CFOA 1139] [2 of 2]"; Box 36;

the crisis drafted later that year similarly downplayed the role of domestic concerns and pointed to Echeverría's increasingly visible position internationally. The report described his administration as "nationalistic, assertive, and more desirous" of assuming a leadership role in the Third World.[73] Furthermore, it warned that Echeverría would "prefer to be seen in the world standing up to the United States" rather than compromise on an unfavorable solution. [74] This stridency in the Echeverría Administration persisted throughout the course of negotiations. In varying reports from the years after Echeverría assumed the presidency, U.S. Ambassador McBride described the Mexican position as "continually hardening" and suggested this most likely reflected a belief among the Mexican government that they could "drive a hard bargain" with U.S. officials.[75] The substance of negotiations confirms this opinion as the Mexican government's positions took on a more forceful character, which suggests the influence of the larger global trends shaping U.S.-Latin America relations during this period.

The hard bargain presented by the Echeverría Administration centered on two principle issues. First, Mexican officials claimed that Mexico deserved water from the Colorado River of equal quality as that received by U.S. consumers just

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John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[73] Task Force Report; Options for Resolution of the United States-Mexico Colorado River Salinity Problem; December 1972; Folder "Colorado River Salinity, 1972 [From CFOA 1139] [1 of 2]"; Box 36; John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[74] Task Force Report; Options for Resolution of the United States-Mexico Colorado River Salinity Problem; December 1972.

[75] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Telegram 5063 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, September 4, 1971, 1912Z*, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 470, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d470 (accessed March 13, 2013).

over the border. Second, Mexican officials pressed for compensation as a result of damages to agricultural lands caused by the high saline waters and threatened legal arbitration if the United States ignored this claim. As to the former, Mexican Foreign Secretary Emilio A. Rabasa articulated the point most forcefully in a meeting with Kissinger in June 1972. A transcript of the conversation recorded Rabasa arguing that the United States "had to be generous" with its resources and that Mexico deserves "the same water as your people get."[76] A U.S. report described this argument as "the escalation of an old claim to an immediate demand" and noted that no Mexican officials previously advanced such an onerous position.[77] The Mexican charge of damages to agricultural lands and the threat of international legal arbitration similarly persisted throughout the course of negotiations, further demonstrating the Echeverría Administration's assertiveness. A meeting between Ambassador McBride and Foreign Secretary Rabasa in September 1971 provides a clear example of this latter trend. In raising the issue, Rabasa argued that the "most logical course" would be to bring the issue to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but that the Echeverría Administration preferred arbitration from a hemispheric body.[78] Despite McBride's report that he "showed no enthusiasm for the idea," Mexican officials continued to raise the issue on numerous occasions.[79] Even in the early months of 1973 when resolution of the crisis seemed close, McBride's

[76] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, June 8, 1972, 3-4 p.m.* Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 479, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d479 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[77] Report; The Mexican Position; 10 June 1972.

[78] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Telegram 718 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, February 12, 1972, 0048Z*. Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 473, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d473 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[79] Embassy in Mexico to State, February 12, 1972.

reports on the Mexican press contain several references to Mexican officials's continued claims for U.S. compensation. Also, the press coverage of these issues provides some indication that interest in these concerns extended beyond the Mexican government into the general populace.

Mexican public opinion, especially that of farmers in the Mexicali Valley, played an important role in motivating the Echeverría Administration to adopt a more aggressive approach to addressing the salinity problem. Local organizing and activism emerged in the Mexicali Valley in the early 1960s following the initial salinity problems created by increased irrigation on the U.S. side of the border. Local organizations, primarily in the Mexicali Valley, engaged in a range of activities such as boycotts, letter writing, and public protests to impress upon the Mexican government the seriousness of the issue. For these local groups, public protest provided a crucial mechanism for communicating the dramatic ecological change occurring in their communities in a political system that provided few outlets for civic participation. This local activism proved influential at key moments in negotiations over the problem, such as in President Díaz Ordaz's decision not to renew Mexico's earlier agreement with the United States at the end of his term. In general, the visibility and force of this local organizing tended to fluctuate depending on the perception of Mexican officials's dedication to the issue. While activism dipped following the agreement reached by Díaz Ordaz's Administration in 1965, the agitation from local farmers began to reemerge in the following years as the agreement proved an inadequate solution in the face of persistent problems.[80]

The public position and internal rhetoric of Mexican officials affirm the continued influence of Mexican public opinion during the Echeverría Administration. In the demand both for equal water quality and compensation for damages, the administration advanced positions that long-proposed by various Mexican groups and officials. [81] Moreover, Echeverría demonstrated his desire to hear from those most affected by the

[80] Ward, 78-85.
[81] Ward, 98.

problem with a visit to the Mexicali Valley in December 1969. Indeed, the damaging effect of high-saline water on Mexicali farmers continually made its way into U.S.-Mexican negotiations. At their June meeting, Rabasa stressed to Kissinger that farmers "demanded that Echeverría get a solution" to the salinity problem during the President's visit there before arriving in office.[82] Echeverría similarly raised the issue in his June meeting with Nixon. After describing his travels in Mexicali, Echeverría asserted that the problem required significant action in order to ensure that "Mexican campesinos" received "the same quality of water as American farmers."[83] Although emphasizing the plight of Mexican farmers, the Echeverría Administration's use of the salinity crisis as a strategic means to hedge the growing dissatisfaction with the Mexican political system and enhance Mexico's image as a Third World leader remained paramount. Nevertheless, the influence of Mexican public opinion manifested itself in other important ways. Reports from U.S. officials in Mexico emphasized the close attention paid to the issue by the Mexican press. At other times, these reports indicated Mexican officials' sensitivity to how the Mexican public would respond to the outcome of negotiations.[84] Although the Echeverría Administration frequently sought to connect their positions with those of the Mexican public, it is clear that public opinion played a role beyond a subject of official rhetoric.

Similar to their Mexican counterparts, the Nixon Administration also faced significant domestic pressure in

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[82] *Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, June 8, 1972, 3-4 p.m.* Emphasis in original.

[83] Transcript 27, Kate Doyle, "The Nixon Tapes."

[84] Telegram 03445 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, May 16, 1973, 160059Z; Telegram 03900 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, May 31, 1973, 010012Z; Telegram 05117 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, July 12, 1973, 122005Z[Electronic Record];Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1976; Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [AAD November 6, 2012].

dealing with the salinity issue. Unlike the Mexican context however, this pressure came through official channels in the seven Colorado River Basin states consisting of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, California, New Mexico and Arizona. A June 1972 report from the White House Domestic Council forecast the likely difficulty the administration faced in dealing with these formidable groups. In writing of the seven Basin state governors, the report described them as "strong individuals" who would "fiercely protect" the water interests of their states.[85] The report used even stronger language to portray the state's congressional leadership, describing them as "powerful, volatile, parochial and very protective" of the Basin's water resources.[86] While the administration communicated their desire to quickly resolve the salinity issue throughout the period of negotiations, they clearly expected Basin state opposition to pose a significant obstacle in reaching a definitive solution, especially one that favored only Mexican interests.

Basin state opposition foremost centered on the argument that under the 1944 Water Treaty, Mexico had no legal claim to any better quality water than it already received. Furthermore, they stressed that any attempt by the Federal government to address the decline in quality with additional water would deplete the states's already insufficient resources. The Committee of Fourteen, a group consisting of two representatives from each Basin state, voiced these points most saliently in a report sent to Nixon shortly after his meeting with Echeverría in June 1972. The report stated that the committee would view "with grave concern" any U.S. commitment to supply Mexico with additional water "to which it has no right."[87]

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[85] Memo; General Political Observations on Colorado River Basin States; 9 June 1972; Folder "Colorado River Salinity [II, 1972] [From CFOA 1140] [2 of 2]"; Box 37; John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[86] Memo; Political Observations on Colorado River Basin States; 9 June 1972.

[87] Memo; Report of the Committee of Fourteen to the Governors of the Seven Colorado River Basin States; 12 July 1972; Folder

Furthermore, it argued that if an agreement did go forward, it would pose "serious problems" and cause "adverse effects" if the additional water provided did not come from augmentation of the existing supply.[88] In the months that followed, each of the seven states's governors forwarded letters addressed to Nixon with a standard text drawn from the committee report. Letters sent to Nixon from Arizona Congressman John J. Rhodes confirm that Congressional opposition drew on similar claims. While recognizing the importance of maintaining good relations with Mexico, Rhodes repeatedly emphasized that Mexico had no legal claim to better quality water. In an early letter from May 1971, Rhodes argued that there existed "no mention of water quality whatsoever" in the 1944 treaty and thus Mexico had "no apparent legal right" to claim better water.[89] While domestic interests in the U.S. may have moved through official channels to a greater extent than in Mexico, their protests similarly emphasized the potential impacts on local environments that might result from changes in the U.S.-Mexican agreement.

While many studies produced for the White House focused on the difficult issue of Basin state opposition, policy discussions at the executive level concluded that maintaining good relations with Mexico trumped domestic concerns. An April 1971 memo from Kissinger to the Secretaries of State and the Interior communicated Nixon's directive that the administration undertake "vigorous efforts" to reach "as expeditiously as possible" a resolution to the salinity problem.[90]

"Colorado River Salinity, 1972 [From CFOA 1139] [1 of 2]"; Box 36; John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Letter; John J. Rhodes to President Nixon; 17 May 1971; Folder "EX CO 100 Mexico 1/1/1971-[1 of 4]"; Box 52; Subject Files: CO (Countries); White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[90] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Secretary of State Rogers and Secretary of the Interior Morton, Washington, April 28, 1971*. Papers

Moreover, the memo noted that while Nixon understood the "difficult technical and domestic factors involved," he wanted "the U.S. position to be as forthcoming as possible."[91] Similarly, a May 1972 memo from Kissinger to Nixon analyzing negotiations up to that point argued that while the issue would likely create "tough problems" in the Basin States, not taking action would "deeply exacerbate [U.S.] relations with Mexico."[92] Indeed, Nixon repeatedly affirmed his commitment to reaching a solution to Echeverría himself at their meeting in the White House, saying in one instance: "I make you my personal commitment that I will work out a solution in cooperation with you before the end of this year."[93] In one sense, the White House commitment reflects the triumph of the State Department in influencing the administration's treatment of the problem. Since the inception of the crisis, the State Department understood the salinity problem as affecting not only U.S.-Mexican relations but the United States's image in the world in general. As such, it was often more receptive to Mexico's position than the Department of Interior who focused on protecting the rights of Western farmers.[94] This greater State Department role also reflects the administration's increasing attention to U.S. relations with Latin America and their potential effect on larger policy goals. In contrast to its approach during Operation Intercept, the need to offset regional challenges motivated the Nixon Administration to exercise greater care in conducting its relations with potential Latin American allies. Consequently, Nixon followed on his pledge to Echevarría by convening an inter-departmental task

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Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 461, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d461 (accessed March 10, 2013).

[91] Kissinger to Rogers and Morton, April 28, 1971.

[92] Memo; Henry A Kissinger to President Nixon; 6 May 1972; Folder "Colorado River Salinity [I, 1972] [From CFOA 1140]"; Box 37; John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

[93] Transcript 27, Kate Doyle, "The Nixon Tapes."

[94] Ward, 68.

force headed by former Attorney General Herbert Brownell to develop and submit a proposal for a definitive solution to the salinity crisis by the end of 1972.

While the task force directed much of its effort at developing a technical means of reducing the salinity of water delivered to Mexico, the chief concern in the White House remained Mexico's damages claims and the threat of international arbitration. Legal experts within the administration concluded that the United States had a relatively weak legal position in regards to damages to Mexican lands and that Mexico would likely win in the context of international arbitration.[95] Beyond the weak legal position, the threat of international arbitration proved especially worrisome as it could potentially damage the United States's image in the world. The Inter-Agency Task Force Report submitted to Nixon in December 1972 described this potential scenario in especially stark terms. The report argued that a case before the World Court in which the United States defended itself against charges of polluting a weaker neighbor's waters "would be a serious embarrassment at home and abroad."[96] In a letter included with the report, task force head Brownell made a similar case, arguing that international arbitration would put the United States "on the defensive before world public opinion."[97] Consequently, administration officials soon emphasized the need for the United

[95] U.S. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Memorandum From William J. Jorden of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 11, 1972*. Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. E-10, 475, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d475 (accessed March 13, 2013).

[96] Task Force Report; Options for Resolution of the United States-Mexico Colorado River Salinity Problem; December 1972.

[97] Letter; Herbert Brownell to President Nixon; 28 December 1972; Folder "Colorado River Salinity, 1972 [From CFOA 1139] [1 of 2]"; Box 36; John C. Whitaker; Staff Member and Office Files; White House Special Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

States to adopt a more conciliatory stance toward Mexico in order to dissuade them from pursuing damage claims. In his letter, Brownell argued that the United States should "be prepared to be flexible" on their commitments to Mexico.[98] Similarly, a later message from Ambassador McBride argued that U.S. officials should "try to improve somewhat" their final proposal in order to encourage Mexico to drop its insistence on U.S. compensation.[99] Because Basin state interests reduced their opposition by this point, officials could advance this position without fear of domestic protest.[100] The concerns among administration officials further suggests the administration's increased sensitivity to the effect its relations with Latin America, specifically Mexico, could have on its larger position in world affairs.

Delivering on the Nixon Administration's desire for a final resolution to the salinity problem, Brownell and the other U.S. officials involved in negotiations ultimately achieved a settlement with Mexico in the fall of 1973. The agreement charged the United States with taking steps to immediately reduce the amount of salinity in waters received by Mexico and proposed the construction of a desalinization plant on the U.S. side of the border. In addition, it convinced the Mexican government to accept the significant U.S. expenditure required to construct the plant as compensation for past damages. While the agreement signified the culmination of many tense years of negotiations, the results did not arrive as triumphantly. Although the United States did take immediate steps to reduce the salinity of the Colorado River, the desalinization plant did was not complete until 1992 at a time when natural processes had already reduced salinity in the region.[101] Despite the reduced impact of

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[98] Letter; Brownell to Nixon; 28 December 1972.

[99] Telegram 04634 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, June 27, 1973, 272022Z [Electronic Record];Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1976; Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [AAD November 6, 2012].

[100] Letter; Brownell to Nixon; 28 December 1972.

[101] Ward, 138-141.

this resolution, the settlement represented a significant diplomatic achievement for Mexico. Reflecting on the agreement in September 1973, Ambassador McBride argued that "Mexican tenaciousness" allowed them to achieve a solution that "while tolerable from the [U.S.] viewpoint … represents major benefits to Mexico and substantial financial concessions" on the part of the United States.[102] Whereas the United States seemed to achieve greater benefits from the resolution of Operation Intercept, a changing international context allowed Mexico to claim a greater share only a few years later.

The Nixon Administration's changing approach to Latin America during the Cold War provides an important backdrop for understanding its relations with Mexico over the issues of drug control and natural resources. Recognizing the diminished U.S. influence in the region, the administration initially adopted a limited and largely disinterested policy for Latin America. Operation Intercept and the backlash it generated across Mexico clearly reflect this early posture. The administration deemed ensuring domestic support more important than countering the United States's bruised image in the region and thus crafted a policy that failed to appreciate the fraught nature of U.S.-Latin American relations at the end of the 1960s. The shift in administration policy towards the region following the election of Salvador Allende in September 1970 had a concomitant effect on its relations with Mexico. As a response, the Nixon Administration adopted a renewed drive to foster ties with sympathetic nations of the hemisphere, which led the United States to employ a more conciliatory approach in negotiating with Mexico over the salinity issue. This change ultimately resulted in a favorable solution for Mexico and showed a Nixon White House more concerned with U.S.-Latin American

[102] Telegram 06598 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, September 5, 1973, 060113Z [Electronic Record];Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1976; Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [AAD November 6, 2012].

relations than during the earlier Operation Intercept. By considering these local issues in relation to the changing contours of the Cold War in Latin America, a clearer understanding emerges of the motivations behind the Nixon Administration's shifting approach in its relations with Mexico during this period.