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**U.S.-Mexico Relations: Doing the Right Thing**

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At the joint appearance of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama at Unity, New Hampshire, on June 27, Senator Clinton referred to Winston Churchill's reported comment that Americans always do the right thing...eventually. There are relatively recent examples supporting this comment. For many other matters, we have to wait and see.

First, some supporting examples focusing mainly on Mexico. The Mérida Initiative grew out of a request made last year by Mexican president Felipe Calderón to U.S. president George W. Bush in Mérida, Yucatán, for help in reducing murders as competing Mexican drug cartels seek dominance in the immensely profitable U.S. market. The U.S. Senate imposed a condition that funds would be released for this purpose only if there was independent verification that the Mexican police and military were not guilty of human rights abuses in their antidrug, antiviolence operations. The Mexican authorities responded that they had their own human rights conditions and would forgo the assistance if civilians designated by the U.S. government had to monitor their behavior. The funds in the U.S. legislation amounted to about 15 percent of Mexico's own antinarcotics expenditures. The Senate eventually modified its conditionality, and the agreement was accepted by the Mexican authorities.

U.S. antidrug policy had earlier, in the 1980s, aroused resentment throughout Latin America. The policy required that the U.S. government certify that Latin American countries were cooperating with U.S. antidrug efforts in order not to lose benefits such as U.S. support for loans from international organizations. Each year, as certification time came around, there was high drama about what would happen. The process was resented because the United States consumed more illicit drugs than any other country but still wanted to dictate what other countries did in this field. The certification process was largely discarded in the 1990s.

The United States, or more precisely the state of Florida, may stimulate an important change in sugar policy. For more than half a century, the United States kept the price of sugar above the world price by limiting sugar imports. Among the main beneficiaries were cane sugar growers in

Florida. The governor of Florida indicated a few weeks ago that the state, in a few years, would buy the land owned by the state's largest sugar company and use the property to restore much of the natural water flow and beauty of the Everglades. The governor's motive was not to do the right thing about U.S. sugar policy, but that might be the outcome—*might*, because there are other domestic interests that benefit from high sugar prices.

Now, some uncertainties. The United States agreed in NAFTA that trucks from Mexico would be allowed to deliver cargo anywhere in the United States in year 2000. When the time came, the United States reneged, citing safety issues. When the U.S. Department of Transportation this year started a trial program with stringent safety standards, the Congress tried to halt the funding. There may be other examples when the United States deliberately refused to meet a trade obligation it entered into freely—and, if so, I would welcome hearing about these from readers. The United States subsidizes and also protects its corn-based ethanol imports from foreign competition. If the market were opened to ethanol imports from more efficient producers, particularly Brazil, this could contribute to reducing U.S. gasoline addiction. The U.S. Congress refuses to legalize the presence of unauthorized immigrants, some 12 million of them, but has not set forth a viable alternative. The current practice is to frighten the immigrants with possible deportation or, if they are not arrested, keep them in limbo. The United States has been unwilling to join with other countries to slow down global warming.

U.S. behavior on issues like those noted above is decided more by the interplay of special interests than by cold-blooded analysis of the national interest. There are exceptions when the national interest becomes policy. Perhaps the most far-reaching example was the Marshall Plan. The recent refusal to take effective action to protect the global environment is based mainly on the cost involved, although this position is often rationalized by minimizing the danger of global warming—but I anticipate that Churchill will be proved correct in this case and that the United States will eventually do the right

thing. The United States is not unique in how policies are formulated; special interests dominate policymaking throughout the world.

The role of special interests, or lobbying, to use another word, is a large topic, and this commentary will not get too deeply into this subject. In order to function, a democracy needs the kind of debate that competing interests bring to the process of policy formulation. For example, the conditioning of U.S. disbursements under the Mérida Initiative legislative process was stimulated by nongovernmental human rights organizations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in particular. The counter position was that the violence brought on by the drug cartels was posing a direct threat to the governance of Mexico and that this was a more important consideration for U.S. drug policy toward Mexico. I support the latter position in large part because it is U.S. drug policy that causes the violence in Mexico, and it ill behooves the United States to then put conditions on how Mexico copes with what may be its most important current domestic problem.

Special interests, however, do pose a threat to the functioning of a democracy because they bring money to the table to influence legislators and political candidates. The competition between competing interests—those whose money gives them access to politicians and the general public whose access is more diffuse—is rarely balanced, as is evident in many of the examples given above. Log rolling surely takes place as well. For example, legislators from urban districts may give consent to income support to rich farmers in exchange for support for something that the urban legislators might want, such as funding for public transportation.

Special interests play a significant role in all sectors of the economy. The financial sector contributed mightily to the current U.S. housing debacle and the accompanying credit crunch, yet spokespersons from this sector continue to oppose more stringent government regulation of their activities. A U.S. market open to imports is supported by multinational corporations and opposed by labor unions. The teamsters have a more important voice in keeping out Mexican trucks than do importers who receive goods from Mexico. Large and wealthy farmers receive income support from the federal government even as the prices of their products reach record highs. The growers and large agricultural companies that benefit from current corn-based ethanol production oppose opening the U.S. market completely to more competitive ethanol from foreign countries. This listing could go on almost endlessly. The competing interplay between special and regional influences is the way U.S. policy is made almost across the board. Indeed, this is at the core of the way democracies work.

Yet, the United States is different from other countries because of its large influence on political and economic outcomes in other countries, especially in our neighbor, Mexico. The funds accumulated by drug dealers from consumption in the United States stimulated the violence and mass bribery of security officials that may be Mexico's most serious problem of governance, but the United States still acts as if the supply of \$400 million to help Mexico deal with this existential problem absolves its complicity. U.S. employers initiated the technique of luring Mexican workers to come to the United States without official authorizing papers, but now that workers and their families have come in greater numbers than we anticipated, we seem to be unwilling to accept the role we played in creating this problem. We limit the amount of ethanol that can be imported to replace some portion of the oil needed for our transportation, even as we talk about energy "independence."

The United States is facing difficult times and one can only hope that the national interest would dominate more frequently. The discussion here has focused much on U.S. interaction with Mexico, but the issues involved in promoting U.S. national interest, rather than special or regional issues, are global. This is particularly true in formulating energy policy, in regulating reckless financial activity, and in the debate about the best techniques for dealing with the effects of global warming. These are the kinds of issues that came to mind as Hillary Clinton reminded me of the Churchill quip, and I hope Churchill turns out to be right on these—eventually.

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