

United States and Mexico share many challenges as neighbors

Bush and Fox determined to be good neighbors

By PATTY REINERT

Copyright 2001 Houston Chronicle

WASHINGTON, D.C. – President Bush wants the Hispanic vote. And a foreign policy success about now would put a notch in his presidential résumé.

His Mexican counterpart, Vicente Fox, wants to bolster support for his National Action Party and to link his poor country's future to that of its rich neighbor.

But whatever their personal agendas when Fox comes to Washington for Bush's first state dinner this week, the fates of two countries may depend on their approach to challenges on the table. Immigration, water sharing, drug trafficking, corruption, pollution, trade and energy policy, to start.

In addition to their ragged 2,000-mile border, the two countries share a history of bitter war, decades of distrust and the inevitable heartbreak that comes whenever a wealthy superpower casts a shadow on the home of excruciating poverty.

For all this baggage, Mexicans have a saying, delivered as a sigh: *Pobre Mexico -- tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca a los Estados Unidos*. Poor Mexico -- so far from God, so close to the United States.

In an Oval Office interview with the *Houston Chronicle* and four other Texas newspapers Friday, Bush said that, past hostilities aside, the United States' relationship with Mexico is based on friendship and neighborliness.

"We want Mexico to succeed. If you're a neighbor, you want your neighbor to do well," he said. "And the better Mexico does, the better off it is for America."

So this week, Bush and Fox will sit down and talk, as friends and neighbors are supposed to do, to work on their mutual problems and plan a future for their increasingly intertwined countries.

Officials on both sides of the Rio Grande say the timing could not be better. There is a Spanish-speaking former border-state governor in the White House and, for the first time in seven decades, an opposition-party president leading Mexico. The North American Free Trade Agreement has kicked in and will eliminate most trade barriers between the United States, Mexico and Canada by the end of the decade. Mexico's political situation is relatively stable, and the U.S. economy, at least in comparison to that of its southern neighbor, is still good.

"There's no question Mexico is important to us," said Stephen Hess, a political expert at Washington's nonpartisan Brookings Institution. "Mexico is our largest this, our largest that. It's where we buy our goods, where we sell our goods. It has major opportunities and major problems, like immigration, that government can fix."

Immigration is expected to be No. 1 on the list of topics for discussion when Fox arrives at the White House on Wednesday. Bush said he and Fox will make no major announcement on a legalization plan, but instead will pledge to work on the issue.

The two leaders also hope to talk about increasing safety and decreasing corruption along the border, expanding NAFTA, allowing Mexican trucks into the U.S. interior, improving relations with Central and South America and modernizing Mexico's energy sector to reduce America's dependence on other countries for oil. Helping each other fight international organized crime, including human trafficking, drug running and money laundering, also is high on the agenda, as is shoring up Mexico's economy.

On Wednesday evening, Fox will be guest of honor at a black-tie state dinner, and later in the week, the two presidents travel to Toledo, Ohio, to visit a Latino community center while the first ladies fly to Chicago to take in a Hispanic art exhibit.

Fox's visit follows a friendly meeting last February, when Bush made Mexico the destination for his first foreign trip as president. He met Fox's children, brothers and 81-year-old mother, giving her a framed photograph of himself and Laura. The two presidents, both former businessmen and state governors, both sons of privilege, both focused on family and faith, made a striking pair, exchanging greetings in Spanish and walking Fox's Guanajuato ranch together.

"To their boots, they are the same," said Maria Jimenez, a Mexican-American immigrant advocate from Houston who traveled to Mexico to meet Fox after his election.

"They are buddies!" said Hess. "There seems to be a connection with Fox, and having a connection is terribly important to George W. Bush," Hess said. "After all, this is the president who looks into the eyes of the Russian premier and it makes a difference to him."

Of course, that personal chemistry doesn't explain the first-ever celebration of [Cinco de Mayo](#) in the White House, brought by a president who, as Texas governor, was criticized for refusing to visit borderland *colonias*.

It doesn't explain the hordes of Washington politicians stampeding into Spanish classes. And it could never explain why one of Mexico's fiercest enemies, Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., beat a path to Mexico City last spring, pledging "a new spirit of cooperation."

Those things, political watchers say, are better explained by pursuit of the Hispanic vote. The latest Census shows there are 35.3 million Hispanics in the United States, making them the fastest-growing minority group. They also are spreading out, becoming the largest minority in 23 of the 50 states. Demographics show that most Hispanics are young in comparison to other ethnic and racial groups, meaning they will one day make a large pot of potential voters.

Bush, who has been tuned in to the trend since his 1998 re-election as Texas governor, campaigned for president last year with Spanish radio ads touting the theme "*Juntos podemos*," "Together, we can."

As president, Bush, whom Newsweek recently described as "equally uncomfortable in English and in Spanish," has broadcast radio addresses in Spanish. He announced earlier this year that the U.S. Navy will halt its controversial practice-bombing on Vieques island, appeasing Puerto Ricans.

The president also has appointed Latinos to high-ranking positions, tapping Cuban-American Mel Martinez as his Housing secretary and Alberto Gonzales as his White House counsel. Gonzales, the American-born son of Mexican migrant workers, has been rumored as Bush's pick if a seat opens on the Supreme Court.

"George W. Bush is clearly comfortable with Hispanics," Hess said. "Sometimes political appointments are done for show, but not that position. You don't pick your personal lawyer on the basis of ethnicity.

"This is one area where you can take George W. at face value," he said. "There are some things he cares about very much, and he cares about Mexico."

Regardless of Bush's motives, though, his familiarity with Hispanic culture and the fact that his sister-in-law is from Mexico make him the Republicans' highest-ranking ambassador for healing racial wounds and bringing more Hispanics into the party.

Hispanics, who traditionally have identified with the Democratic Party because of its focus on helping the poor, have been increasingly turned off by the Republican Party since the early 1990s when then-California Gov. Pete Wilson pushed through the anti-immigrant Proposition 187. The law denied some health care, education and social services to all non-citizen immigrants, even those living in the United States legally.

Today, Republicans are trying to show the growing Latino population, the majority of whom are Catholic, that they could find a home in the Republican Party, which shares their culturally conservative values on issues such as abortion and gay rights.

But political analysts and pollsters say Hispanics continue to identify with Democrats on gun control, affirmative action, health care and immigrant rights.

Many Hispanics, especially new immigrants, don't register and vote in the first place. Those who do tend to vote not on candidates' views on abortion, but on their views on jobs and education -- issues affecting working-class families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In last year's run for the White House, Bush did well among Texas Hispanics, though he still lost their vote by a small margin. In Florida, where his brother Jeb is governor and where Hispanics have voted Republican in presidential races for the past 30 years, Bush's rival, former Vice President Al Gore, received, on average, two of every three Latino votes. Nationwide, Bush won 35 percent of the Hispanic vote.

Fox, meanwhile, has his own political reasons for courting U.S.-based Mexicans. The 59-year-old former Coca-Cola executive was elected last summer on the ticket of the center-right National Action Party, or PAN. Though he received only 46 percent of the vote, his election brought a dramatic end to 71 years of one-party rule in Mexico by the Institutional Revolutionary Party.

Created to end the bloodshed between victors of Mexico's 1910 revolution, the PRI brought political stability to the country, but also was seen as repressive and undemocratic, giving Mexico its reputation for corruption and human rights abuses.

Although Mexican presidents are limited to one six-year term, Fox is determined to do what he can to solidify the PAN's hold on power at a time when the Mexican Congress, federal bureaucracy and several state governments are still controlled by the PRI and other parties.

When he took office last December, Fox pledged to resolve the 7-year-old rebellion of the mostly Mayan Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas. He promised 7 percent economic growth and said he would attack poverty, improve education and eliminate official corruption.

He has made some progress in Mexico and hopes that Mexican nationals living in the United States will lend their political and financial support to his cause in their homeland.

His first official event at the Mexico City presidential compound, Los Pinos, was to meet with migrant leaders, asking them to invest in businesses and factories in Mexico and to work with him on a plan to allow dual citizens living in the United States to vote in Mexican elections.

John Bailey, an expert on U.S.-Mexico relations at Georgetown University's Mexico Project, said that whatever Fox and Bush are able to accomplish politically with this visit, there is much work to be done if Mexico and the United States are to build a solid future of cooperation and economic partnership.

The next decade will make clear, he said, that if Mexico's relatively young and poor people can prosper, they will create a huge market for U.S.-made goods. And as the U.S. population ages, Mexico's young migrants will provide even more labor to keep America's jobs filled and its companies competitive.

"Mexico needs us," he said. "And we need Mexico."

First published in the Houston Chronicle September 2, 2001