



Photo courtesy of Gobierno Federal.

## U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM

President-elect Obama greets President Calderón, January 2009.

# Missed Connections

by Sarah Krupp

President Barack Obama inherited a financial calamity. Mexican President Felipe Calderón assumed leadership of a country in the grip of organized crime. With both leaders mired in their respective conflicts, visions of a collaborative U.S.–Mexico policy have fallen by the wayside.

Yet, under different circumstances, the two presidents might have taken U.S.–Mexico relations to an unprecedented level, benefitting both countries, argued Calderón’s former foreign policy advisor, Rafael Fernández de Castro.

“We know [Obama] understands the importance of Mexico,” said Fernández de Castro in his CLAS talk, “but... he cannot really deliver to Mexico.”

In Obama’s only meeting with a foreign leader before his inauguration, the president-elect told Calderón, “that he was here in the presidency because of Mexicans... He

knew that because of the Latino vote, he had become president of the U.S.”

The tone of the meeting was warm and friendly. Obama was receptive to Calderón’s proposals on security, health care, immigration and regional competitiveness. Yet, looking back, Fernández de Castro said that if he had foreseen the violence that would ravage Mexico, he would have recommended that security dominate Calderón’s agenda with Obama. Stopping the illegal flow of assault weapons from American smugglers to Mexican cartels has since become a top priority for the Mexican government. Some 90 percent of the weapons seized by Mexican authorities were purchased in the United States, he said.

Whether placing greater emphasis on security during the presidents’ initial meeting would have had any real impact is another matter. There has been little progress on the initiatives that, at the time, seemed to have traction,

such as health care collaboration and improving the conditions of Mexican immigrants in the United States.

Calderón proposed that the U.S. government permit its seniors to receive Medicare benefits in Mexico, where health care is much less expensive. Encouraging Americans to retire in Mexico, Fernández de Castro said, would decrease U.S. government expenditures on health care for elderly citizens while providing a boon to the Mexican health care industry. About 1 million retired Americans live in Mexico now, but if U.S. citizens could continue to receive benefits abroad, an estimated 4 million more would immigrate there, he said.

As for improving the welfare of Mexican immigrants in the United States, if anything, conditions have deteriorated on Obama's watch. The weak economy has triggered a backlash against immigrants and ever-more discriminatory laws in states such as Alabama, where, as Fernández de Castro put it bluntly, "they are treated like criminals." National legislation that would have offered a pathway to residency and citizenship for undocumented students did not receive congressional approval. Barred from most public assistance, undocumented immigrants are often unable to afford college in the United States. Yet, they may also find it impossible to attend a college in Mexico, according to Fernández de Castro, because the

Mexican university system does not recognize their U.S. high-school diplomas.

When asked by a member of the audience about the record-setting number of deportations of undocumented immigrants under the Obama administration, Fernández de Castro conceded that, "Obama, on immigration issues, has been a big disappointment. Let's face it. We know he doesn't have the political capital anymore to go about reform, but he has done too little. A lot of people feel disappointed."

Though Fernández de Castro insisted that the, "number one, number two and number three priority for Mexican foreign policy is the U.S.," he outlined four additional agenda items.

#### **Developing a Free Trade Agreement With Brazil**

Combined, Brazil and Mexico make up two-thirds of the Latin American market. "If these two giants get together, we can really make a difference in the Latin American market, but it's proven difficult," said Fernández de Castro. He faulted Mexico's private sector and opponents in the Mexican administration for thwarting the expansion of commerce between the two countries.

#### **Strengthening Economic Links With China**

By linking its economic fate almost completely to the United States, Mexico has watched from the sidelines

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[Latino families move out of their Alabama homes after the passage of immigration law HB56.](#)



Photo from The Washington Post/Getty Images.

as Brazil, Peru, Argentina and Chile have profited from China's growth. Mexico currently has a trade deficit of \$42 billion with China and yet, China is "not investing even \$1 million in Mexico." Fernández de Castro said he often tells his compatriots that when the authoritarian Chinese state becomes the world's largest economy, "we are going to miss the U.S. We are going to miss the good old days."

### Aiding Central America With Development and Security

The drug war has dealt an additional blow to Central America, a region already strained by violence and poverty. The isthmus is now a major artery for drugs trafficked from Colombia to Mexico on their way to the United States, as well as a haven for cartels evading the crackdowns in Mexico and Colombia. Mexico must do more to aid its neighbors, Fernández de Castro said, as well as to protect their citizens, who pass through Mexico on their way to the United States. Central American transmigrants are increasingly targeted for exploitation by drug traffickers. In 2010, 72 migrants were slaughtered in San Fernando, a town in northern Mexico.

### Asserting Itself as a "Middle Global Power"

Fernández de Castro believes that Mexico should take on a larger role in global politics. As an example, he

[A Nicaraguan soldier inspects a helicopter abandoned near the Honduran border by suspected drug traffickers.](#)



Photo by Elinor Martinez/Getty Images

cited the part Mexico played in the global discussion of climate change, a cause about which Calderón, an avid environmentalist, is passionate. Fernández de Castro said that Mexico should take a more public position in global forums as well as improve relations with the international media.

There also seemed to be a more personal agenda behind Fernández de Castro's talk. Although he no longer works for the president, having returned to his former post as chair of the International Studies Department at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), a leading private Mexican university, it was clear that he hoped to bolster the Mexican president's image. Internationally, Calderón is known for his failing war on drugs. His attack on the cartels provoked a scourge of violence that has claimed more than 45,000 lives in less than five years — with no end in sight. To be sure, Calderón does not deserve all the blame. He inherited a corrupt government, a weak police force and an inept justice system. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000, had incorporated organized crime into its tight fold. Yet critics contend that is all the more reason Calderón should have strengthened institutions and social programs before launching headlong into an offensive against the cartels.

Fernández de Castro spoke of a side of Calderón that the public rarely sees — his intelligence, commitment and integrity. In stark contrast with most of his predecessors, the president is refreshingly "stingy," treating public money "as if it were coming out of his own pocket," said Fernández de Castro. In Los Pinos (the Mexican equivalent of the White House) parties are paid for with private money and a placard details "who paid for the *carnitas*, the *chicharrones* and the drinks," he said. Calderón, Fernández de Castro maintained, is a man of principle; sometimes, as when he decided to meet with the Dalai Lama at the risk of a fallout with China, of too much principle.

"I think that was a mistake," said Fernández de Castro. "Foreign policy is not about principle. It's about interests."

[Rafael Fernández de Castro is the founder and chair of the Department of International Studies at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México \(ITAM\) and the co-convenor of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum, an annual conference hosted by CLAS and ITAM. He spoke for CLAS on September 22, 2011.](#)

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