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Viewpoint: Editorial Opinions from the "San Antonio Light"

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VIEWPOINT: Editorial Opinions from the San Antonio Light

By Avelardo Valdez

**U.S. and Mexico have shared interest
in democratization process**

September 7, 1990

Cuahtemoc Cardenas' appearance in San Antonio today is part of the democratization of the Mexican political system. His lecture addresses issues relating to social, economic and political reform in present-day Mexico. It is an opportunity to interact and dialogue with one of the leading opposition political figures in Mexican politics.

Cardenas is largely responsible for the challenge to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, in the Spanish acronym) and its 61-year, one-party rule. In the 1988 presidential election Cardenas headed a coalition of opposition parties that officially received 31% of the popular vote, against 17% for Manuel Clouthier of the National Action Party (PAN) and 50% for PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In the Mexican Congress, the PRI obtained its smallest legislative majority ever when it lost 240 of the 500 seats to opposition parties.

In October 1988, Cardenas and other members of his coalition convened for the creation of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). During the last two years the PRD has won the support of an eclectic coalition including urban dwellers, peasant groups, environmentalists, women's groups, labor leaders and disgruntled PRI members. Cardenas was originally one of the leaders of the Democratic Current, a movement within the PRI to open up the party's decision-making process.

The PRD has won several local elections throughout Mexico, particularly in the states of Michoacan, Vera Cruz and Guerrero. Cardenas was formerly governor and senator from Michoacan as a member of the PRI. In areas where the PRD has been successful there have been

several major confrontations with the PRI. As recently as August, nine people (five PRD and four PRI) were killed in the state of Puebla over an election-result dispute. The PAN has had its share of successes since the 1988 election unprecedented in Mexico's political history. The PAN candidate won the governorship in Baja, California in 1989 and was officially recognized as the winner.

The two main opposition parties have forced the PRI to consider making reforms in the political system. If these will be actualized is another issue. At a recent PRI convention of more than 8,500 top-ranking members, there was a lot of talk of change, but few actual changes. The debates were between the reform-minded President Salinas and the conservative old guard, which objects to any changes that might impact on its power. Salinas realizes that its political machine needs to change if it is to survive in the world's changing political landscape.

There is also dissent over the economic policies being proposed and implemented by the new administration both inside and outside the PRI. Privatization of state-owned industries is seen as a vehicle to break the labor unions and reduce wages. And the new trade agreement being proposed between Mexico and the United States (essentially to integrate both markets) is perceived as further opening Mexico up as a source of cheap labor for transnational businesses. The impact of this trade agreement here in Texas needs to be further scrutinized. Will this trade pact facilitate the movement of state industries to Mexico as they escape relatively higher Texas salaries?

Within the last few years U.S. foreign policy has focused on the democratization process in Europe, China, Central America and most recently in the Middle East. Little serious attention has been given to Mexico, despite the common geographic, social and economic ties that characterize U.S.-Mexican relations. Mexico and the United States share a 2,000 mile border. The Mexican-origin population in this

country comprises more than 12 million people. About 70% (\$27 million) of Mexico's exports come to the United States, which sends nearly 7% (\$25 million) of its total exports to Mexico.

The democratization of Mexico's political institutions is essential to Mexico if it is going to reach its full potential as an industrialized nation. The political and economic system, particularly from the end of World War II up until the 1982 economic crisis, was one of the success stories of the Third World. During this period its GNP growth was higher than that of most industrialized nations and its political system was one of the most stable in all of Latin America.

Nonetheless, contemporary Mexico is experiencing an economic and democratic crisis. As with other nations confronting this problem, most notably the Eastern Bloc countries, Mexico must make reforms if it is to survive.

In Mexico this means that opposition parties need to be able to run candidates in free elections at local, state and national levels without intimidation and violence. Voters need to be allowed to vote for the candidates and parties of their choice without fear of physical or economic reprisals.

The results of these elections need to be respected by the government, and election fraud needs to be eliminated. As well, the Mexican press needs to be allowed the freedom to report on and criticize all aspects of Mexican society. These are essential building blocks of democracy.

As Mexico's political and economic system reforms itself, it can learn from the experience of the United States, which is in a constant process of democratization. The United States also has lessons to learn from Mexican society. This is

why it is essential to maintain an open dialogue between both societies. The end results are going to be greater respect and understanding and solutions to the many problems that we confront as neighboring countries.

Carefully assess consequences of free-trade pact

May 2, 1991

Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's recent visit to San Antonio demonstrated the emerging influence of Mexican-Americans on U.S. public policy.

The choice of San Antonio by the Mexican government as one of three U.S. cities for the "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries" exhibit was aimed at gaining the Mexican-American support for the free-trade agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada.

But Mexican-Americans need to understand the full implications of this economic pact before they endorse an agreement that may not benefit all segments of the Mexican-American community and Mexican society equally. Salinas assured us that all three countries would prosper with increased jobs and markets with the free-trade agreement. Moreover, he argued that this agreement is essential to the economic transformation and modernization of Mexico.

In the United States free-trade advocates include the Bush administration, business interests such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and free-market supporters -- the same groups that opposed minimum-wage increases, the civil rights bill, stronger environmental rules and the equal rights amendment.

They and their Mexican counterparts are urging that we adopt the fast track, which essentially means there would be no congressional debate and the administration will negotiate the policy. Groups such as labor, environmentalists, civil-rights organizations, human rights groups and minorities oppose this agreement, or at least question certain aspects

of it. Input into this debate by these groups will be stifled if the fast track is adopted.

Salinas understands that many in this nation will look to Mexican-American business interests, civic leaders and labor unions with long histories of business and political relations with Mexico do not support this agreement the nation is less likely to reach a consensus.

The Mexican president's agenda in San Antonio reflected the importance of Mexican-Americans in this discourse. His short visit, during which the city's major institutions and organizations were all competing for his time, included an exclusive meeting with the city's Hispanic leadership. His only major public appearance was on the West Side at Guadalupe Plaza, and his speech demonstrated a new-found respect in the Mexican government for the Mexican-origin population in the United States.

Mexican-American support of the free-trade agreement, however, should be redicated on the answers to several questions. First, how would it impact on Mexican-American blue-collar workers? Sectors most likely to be affected will be labor-intensive industries and manufacturing. These industries, in which most Mexican-Americans are employed, have been the most hurt by the economic transformations occurring in this country over the past two decades. Mexican-Americans should not support free trade if it worsens their economic condition.

Second, will the free-trade agreement create new U.S. jobs that provide livable salaries, health-care insurance and occupational mobility? In areas on the U.S.-Mexican border where the maquiladora industry currently exists this has not been the case.

Mexican-Americans should also be concerned with the impact of this agreement on the Mexican economy, where economic disparities since the late 1970s have increased significantly. The agreement should ensure that if Mexico experiences

prosperity, it has a positive impact on all segments of society. Increased prosperity if equally distributed could create less of a need for Mexicans to migrate to the United States and compete with Mexican-Americans for the few jobs that exist. A stable and prosperous economy is in the best interests of both nations.

The free-trade agreement also needs to assure that this relationship be based on mutual understanding, dignity and respect for national sovereignty. This means that all three countries share equally in the development of a policy that will benefit their economies in the long term. This will be easier for the two industrial giants than for Mexico, whose economy is more characteristic of the Third World.

Free trade would no doubt benefit the Mexican-American middle class business sector, which will play an important role as a broker in this new economic relationship. The potential impact on the Mexican-American workers from which the middle-class have risen is more dubious. The Mexican-American working class traditionally has been the key to social mobility for this group. An adverse economic impact on this fragile segment of the Mexican-origin population could increase the downward mobility they experienced during the last decade.

Avelardo Valdez, a University of Texas San Antonio sociology professor, was a Senior Fulbright Scholar in Mexico City in 1987-88.