



EARL ANTHONY “TONY” WAYNE was born in Sacramento, California, on August 5, 1950. He earned his Bachelor of Arts from the University of California at Berkeley, his Master of Arts from Stanford University, his Master of Arts from Princeton University and his MPA from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. A career diplomat since 1975, he was posted overseas in Morocco; France; Belgium; Argentina, where he served as ambassador; Afghanistan; and, finally, Mexico. He took a leave of absence and worked as the National Security Correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* in the late 1980s. Over the following decades, Wayne served in the State Department’s Counterterrorism office and as Director for Western Europe at the National Security Council, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Mission to the European Union, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe and Canada, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe. He became the longest-serving Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs. Wayne was Director of Economics and Development and then Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. He was confirmed as a “Career Ambassador,” the most senior diplomatic rank in the U.S. Foreign Service, in 2010. Ambassador Wayne retired from the Foreign Service on his return from Mexico in 2015. He was awarded the Order of the Águila Azteca, Mexico’s highest decoration given to a foreigner. He is currently a Public Policy Fellow and co-chair of the Mexico Institute’s advisory board at the Woodrow Wilson Center and a Distinguished Diplomat in Residence and Professor at American University’s School of International Service.

During Wayne’s three years and 11 months as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, U.S. President Barack Obama was reelected and visited Mexico City, Los Cabos, and Toluca; the PRI regained the presidency; Sinaloa Cartel kingpin El Chapo Guzmán escaped from prison; drug lord Rafael Caro Quintero was freed; a major corruption scandal plummeted President Peña Nieto’s popularity; 43 students in Ayotzinapa went missing and were believed killed; and CIA agents were attacked by Mexican Federal Police.



Earl Anthony “Tony” Wayne

2011–2015

EARL ANTHONY “TONY” WAYNE became U.S. ambassador to Mexico on September 6, 2011, six months after his predecessor was forced to resign. The countries were going through different political moments. In the United States, President Barack Obama had announced his intention to seek reelection; in Mexico, the six-year term of President Calderón was coming to an end. The surprising resignation of Ambassador Carlos Pascual, after a public dispute with Calderón over secret embassy cables criticizing the Mexican military that had been leaked by Wikileaks, was a blow to the Mérida Initiative, the \$2.3 billion package of U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance to Mexico. Unwilling to leave the embassy leaderless for too long, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wasted no time in looking for a new ambassador, preferably a career Foreign Service person to facilitate Senate confirmation, with experience in the implementation of foreign aid programs. At the time, Wayne was serving as Deputy Ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. He had been charged with coordinating multibillion-dollar nonmilitary U.S. government programs to Afghanistan. Clinton believed that this experience, work on

economic diplomacy and general knowledge of Spanish, ideally qualified him for the demanding Mexican assignment. Though Wayne did not know Mexico, and Mexico did not know him, he arrived with impeccable diplomatic credentials.

But his connections to Afghanistan, where the U.S. was militarily engaged in fighting Osama bin Laden, did not initially go over well in Mexico. The “messenger is the message,” critics decried. The Obama Administration rejected the notion that the security challenges in Mexico were comparable with those in Afghanistan. Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow came out in Wayne’s defense. High-ranking diplomats are generally not sent to war theaters, Davidow explained; therefore, it was a “real act of patriotism” for Wayne to have accepted the dangerous assignment in Afghanistan. He called the decision to send him to Mexico “excellent.”¹

When Wayne arrived in Mexico City relations were tense. Media reports about the United States expanding its role in Mexico’s war on drugs by sending intelligence and military personnel, the creation of a joint “espionage center” in Mexico City,² a failed secret operation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives that allowed illegal guns be smuggled into Mexico, and the public dispute around Pascual, had generated tensions that Obama’s second ambassador had to deal with on day one.

Wayne kept a low profile. He avoided controversy. He was discreet and professional. His rare public statements focused on highlighting the positive side of the relationship. He kept away from talking about controversial domestic issues. He promoted soft-power initiatives such as clean energies, empowerment of women, English teaching, student exchange programs, bike riding and music. He even helped connect the rock bands Kiss and Linkin Park, as well as Lady Gaga, with Mexican youth groups interested in the environment and in fighting bullying and drug addiction.

But behind closed doors, Wayne did not shy from addressing tough issues such as corruption, human rights violations and impunity. After an armed ambush by Federal Police of two alleged CIA agents on a Mexican road, the most sensitive crisis he faced, Wayne asked for an urgent meeting with President Calderón to ask for a full investigation. Wayne also dealt with the bilateral crisis over El Chapo Guzmán’s escape from a high-security Mexican prison in 2015. An

embarrassed President Peña Nieto was left no option but to accept U.S. assistance to recapture the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel.

1. Dolia Estévez, "Los Retos de Wayne," *Poder y Negocios*, September 2011.
2. Ginger Thompson, "U.S. Widens Role in Battle against Mexican Drug Cartels," *The New York Times*, August 6 2011.

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Wayne observed, from the diplomatic sidelines, the 2012 presidential elections that brought the PRI back to the presidency. He met in private with the main actors, including Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current Mexican president. He was careful not to give the impression of interference. Based on most polls, the embassy was confident the PRI would win.

I interviewed Ambassador Wayne on October 11, 2018, in his office at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. For almost two hours, he spoke about the challenges and gratifications of his Mexican assignment, and of what he believes to be his legacy.



How did you find out about your nomination?

In early 2011, when I was deputy ambassador in Afghanistan, I was called to come back to Washington. I was told that the chief of staff and the secretary of state³ wanted to talk to me. I went in and said hello to her chief of staff and she said somebody'd like to talk to me. The secretary of state came in and said, "Hi Tony, how are you doing? How would you like to serve as ambassador to Mexico?"

Were you caught by surprise?

It was a surprise to me. I knew they had been looking for some place that they might offer me, but I didn't know about Mexico. "Mexico? That's a really big place, a big relationship," I said. "Yeah, but you've been helping to manage this massive effort that we have in Afghanistan and you speak Spanish," Secretary Clinton replied. So, I said, "Thank you very

much, let me make sure I have a chance talk to my wife about this." I went home and thought about it with my wife. The next day I called back to the secretary's chief of staff, and said I would be happy to serve.

Did you have a particular place you wanted to be assigned to?

I wouldn't say I had a particular place I wanted to go. The year before, before I was asked to stay another year in Afghanistan, it had looked like I might be nominated ambas-

3 Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, 2009-2013.

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sador to Colombia, but then they asked me to stay for a second year, I wasn't sure what would be open or where I would go. Mexico was not on the list of countries that we knew were going to be open because this was a special request.

Did you give it much thought?

I saw it as a massive relationship and thus a very complex job with many different actors on both sides of the border that needed to be addressed, but also an honor. At that time, the President of Mexico wanted to have a new ambassador.

How was your Senate confirmation?

It was a very quick process. I went back and finished in Afghanistan, left at the beginning of June. Came back to Washington. Did not have any vacation. I had to start learning about Mexico and practicing my Spanish which I hadn't really spoken for two years. After intensive study and preparation, I had my confirmation hearing in the summer and went down to Mexico in order to be there for the *Grito*, Mexico's Independence Day celebration.

How much did you know about Mexico?

I hadn't served in Mexico. I had worked and participated in our economic discussions with Mexico in the early 2000, when I was assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs. I remember meeting Agustín Carstens⁴ and I knew Angel Gurría⁵ and others from those U.S.-Mexico economic dialogues. But I had not worked on U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations, rather I had been working more on specific economic issues.

Did your work in Afghanistan help you deal with the security problems in Mexico?

Secretary Clinton saw I had worked well with other governments. As assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs for six years, I worked all around the world managing relationships. In Afghanistan, anything that wasn't military, we tried at the Embassy to organize, and then we tried to coordinate better with the military for its non-military aid programs as well as with other donors. I'd also been working on rule-of-law programs, justice programs, which were quite big in Afghanistan at that time. At that

4. 4 Governor of the Central Bank of Mexico, 2010-2017.

5. 5 Secretary of the Treasury, 1998-2000.

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time an American program⁶ was under way for Mexico but had not yet delivered much assistance at all.

Did press comments about the “messenger being the message” surprise you?

I did not expect this type of coverage, but I did see the articles. I was trying to explain that I have all this other experience and that I happen to have been in Afghanistan from 2009 through early 2011 because it was a major priority for the U.S. government and the U.S. government tried to send some of its most experienced diplomats to help. I was Deputy Ambassador in Afghanistan. This was a time when the U.S. had five ambassador-ranked people serving in Kabul. I knew that we had this big program in Mexico we were trying to make sure it got under way in an effective way, the Mérida Initiative. I saw it as an opportunity to help.

How did you prepare for Mexico?

It was very intense. I got piles of papers from the Mexico desk at the State Department, but I only had two weeks basically to read them and to ask questions. Then I had my hearing, it went very well. I got a few weeks to practice Spanish again at the Foreign Service Institute. It was a little hard, because in Afghanistan you either spoke English or the chief of staff of the president spoke French. Anyway, it started to come back to me!

Did you have the opportunity to read Mexican literature, Octavio Paz for example, and get to know more about the culture?

I tried, but when you have a total of two and a half months to prepare, there's a lot to absorb. I tried to talk to a lot of people, and happily there were several seminars that people organized and invited many experts to come and talk to me about Mexico and Mexican culture and history. I did try to read Mexican history, but I didn't get to read Octavio Paz.

And now?

Well, let's say I've read excerpts in Spanish and longer snippets in English. It's still easier for me to read English.

Did you meet President Obama before going to Mexico?

6 The Mérida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexico security cooperation agreement launched by the Bush and Calderón Administrations in 2007.

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I did. I met him before I went to Mexico, and we had a nice discussion in the Oval Office. We talked about him wanting to help President Calderón and President Obama said that that was important to him. We had a nice chat.

Did he tell you which were his priorities in Mexico?

He did. He talked about one of the most obvious things he wanted to get our security cooperation agreed and going forward in a good way to tackle the serious security challenges. And at the same time, he made clear that he wanted to strengthen the economic ties and manage all the many different things he knew came up in U.S.-Mexico ties even though he didn't get to pay attention to in this complex relationship.

Was President Obama concerned with the narrative that Mexico was becoming a failed state?

No, but he was clear that he wanted to do all that we could to make sure we were being as supportive as possible to President Calderón in his effort to establish and strengthen public security. It was clear from the news that there was a lot of violence going on. President Obama wanted to make sure that we focus on providing the help that President Calderón needed.

Did Obama give you any concrete guidelines?

Well, I got a letter from the president that laid out specific issues and objectives.

What did it say?

I don't remember the specifics. It was two pages. All ambassadors get a letter from the president, not just ambassadors to Mexico. It is a standard thing. They lay out a number of priorities, some of which are bureaucratic and administrative priorities that are your responsibility as ambassador, and some of which are programmatic or foreign policy priorities for the relations with that country. We had a good talk about things which were his biggest priorities, and his biggest priorities were supporting President Calderón in his effort to restore and strengthen public security, which he believed was important to keeping the broad relationship on track.

When you arrived in Mexico, did you have to apologize for WikiLeaks?

I did not apologize. I focused on the positive message. On how important the relationship is and on doing all we could to make sure this was a strong relationship and we

had the closest possible collaboration between our officials. I really avoided going into what might have happened earlier.

How was your relationship with Calderón?

I felt that we had a very good relationship to talk through difficult issues, and we could talk about a range of issues. We would see each other at bigger public events, but we would also have small meetings to discuss some of the difficult issues that needed to be worked through. Yes, I had access to him whenever I needed. Of course, he had access to me whenever he wanted to have access to me.

And with his cabinet?

I also had very good access to members of his cabinet, with the foreign minister, with the attorney general and with the secretaries of *gubernación* and public safety. It wasn't Poiré⁷ at first, he was at CISEN,⁸ I'm referring to the gentleman that died in a helicopter crash.⁹ Poiré came to *gubernación* after that. We also had a good relation with García Luna, Secretary of Public Safety at the time.¹⁰ Also, with the secretaries of communications and transportation, and health. With everybody because the U.S.-Mexico relationship it is so intense that you have all agencies, practically, from both governments talking to each other on a regular basis working on very complex agendas. We were working very hard to make sure we were progressing across that range of relationships and not just focusing on the security relationship. Though I knew that we had to get the security issues right, one of my big convictions was that we still needed to keep working to find progress on all the other aspects of the relationship that were just as important. We share a 2000 miles border. All sorts of things happen, good and bad. We need to pay attention.

How would you describe Calderón?

As a serious person with strong opinions. Of course, for me, coming in as an American, I was not steeped in Mexican politics. The president had allies and people that were

7. 7 Alejandro Poiré, Secretary of *Gobernación*, 2011-2012.
8. 8 Center for Investigation and National Security.
9. 9 Francisco Blake Mora, Secretary of *Gobernación*, 2010-2011.
10. 10 Arrested by U.S. law enforcement officials on drug-related charges in 2019, Genaro García Luna is currently awaiting trial in New York. Suspicions among U.S. officials that García Luna was more willing to go after some criminal groups than others, don't appear to have hindered the relation with him at the time.



less allied to him. Especially in the federal and sub federal levels. There were difficulties in cooperation with certain governors, for example. When we would talk, those things would come up. But I found him to be very thoughtful, very committed. He also would pay a lot of attention to detail.

Did he have a temper?

I didn't see his temper. I've heard he might have had one. But whenever we were talking it was very straight forward, very reasonable discussion, and tempers didn't get involved in that. We always had very good, solid, reasonable discussions about even very difficult issues.

Do you think he trusted you?

Well, I would like to think so. In the U.S.-Mexico relationship there are elements of trust and distrust on both sides and so you were always in many ways trying to expand the areas of trust and shrink the areas of distrust. Part of the complexity was that there was nobody on either side that could control all the actors even on their own side of the table.

Can you explain?

For example, as you know as a member of the press, there were regularly these articles that would come out that would try to make it look like there were big problems between the two countries. Or stories that were trying to expose new areas of cooperation that were controversial. Those journalists got the information from inside one administration or the other. You needed to manage all of these press stories on both sides of the border so that people really understood what was going on, so that the story wasn't exaggerated or distorted. It doesn't mean there were things the press should not write about, but these are things you can't necessarily control as an ambassador. You try to manage those as they come up. I would work to manage them by talking to my Mexican counterparts, by talking to the press, by calling back to Washington and saying, what's this? It was a regular effort.

How often did you meet with Calderón?

I don't feel there was any lack of being able to talk to him. If I asked for a meeting, they would arrange one, maybe not right away, but if we asked for one, we would get one and there were a number of times I asked for them. Similarly with the ministers. I would try to do things with the ministers more often than not because the president's a busy guy. We could fix things at a ministerial level, sort things out, or set up new cooperative efforts. It's not all about fixing problems, it's also about cementing opportunities or actually creating new opportunities.

Do you recall any specific instance that required you to speak with Calderón in person?

Yes, when we were thinking through the best strategies for fighting organized crime groups and when there were some needs for some adjustment to cooperation between the various parts of both governments. One of the challenges in working on some of these issues is that there were a lot of different actors in Mexico and in the U.S. working on law enforcement and justice. They didn't always coordinate with each other inside either government. They didn't always get along with each other, and there were rivalries. There were some groups, some people, who trusted each other more than others. What impressed me is that whenever we had those conversations, President Calderón thought about the subject very seriously. He was well informed, and we'd really go back and forth about were the current strategies and cooperative efforts yielding good results, or could we do it better.

Was he concerned about the lack of coordination between U.S. law enforcement agencies?

Yes, we discussed the lack of coordination between law enforcement and justice agencies in both countries, and we both worked on trying to make that better. In politics you have a certain rhetoric that you say publicly, which is not necessarily incorrect, but often you're saying it for a certain reason. What we would try to do is make sure we could talk through things so that we could get to solutions. I would spend a lot of time working to try to get people to coordinate better in the U.S. government also. And I tried to get people who sometimes had had experiences, bad experiences a year or two before, to take new approaches to try to create new openings. It took convincing, often people on both sides, both governments. Happily, it worked. I think there was a lot of progress in dealing with some of that, some of those disconnects.

Did you ask to talk to Calderón when CIA agents were ambushed by Mexican federal policemen?¹¹

Well that's not actually right. There were Americans in the car, there were various people in the car who were associated with the embassy.

¹¹ On August 24, 2012, two CIA employees sent to Mexico as part of a multiagency effort to bolster efforts to fight drug traffickers were wounded when gunmen from the Mexican Federal Police fired on an American Embassy vehicle. Randal Archibald and Eric Schmitt, "American Shot in Mexico Were CIA Operatives in Drug War," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2012.

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Two?

I think there were more people in the car.

Including one Mexican Navy Captain?

Maybe it was only three. In any case, yes, that was one of the times that President Calderón and I talked. I also talked to the attorney general, the secretaries of *gobernación* and public safety. It was a very serious incident to have police shooting at a car with U.S. and Mexican officials in it.¹² It was a problem. The initial response from lower-level authorities was not forthcoming. The president did make a call to make sure there was a more forthcoming, immediate and helpful response to what had happened.¹³ That opened the door to finding and identifying who had been involved.

Why fire on an American embassy vehicle with diplomatic plates?

It was never clear to me. I don't think it was targeting Americans. The initial story they gave was that there had been kidnappers in the area using false plates and they thought these were kidnappers. I don't know what finally happened in that judicial case involving these gentlemen who were doing the shooting. I don't think I ever saw anything that said the case came to a final decision.

What do you think happened?

I think they were probably rogue policemen either linked to the cartels or their own efforts to gain extra income. I don't know. They certainly weren't doing this as part of their official authorized activity. In that sense, we are very grateful to the Mexican Navy for arriving on the scene and preventing any of the people in the car from being killed.

Bizarre.

It was very bizarre, very scary and very threatening. It could have been much, much more damaging to the individuals as well as to the bilateral relationship.

12. 12 "It is clear, as acknowledged by the GOM, that it was the Federal Police who attempted to stop our vehicle, pursued it and opened fire on it at several points during the encounter. Through sustained long arms fire, the attackers managed to penetrate the embassy vehicle's armor and wound the two U.S. personnel occupants inside before disabling the vehicle." Unclassified secret embassy cable sent by Wayne to Washington, August 25, 2012.

13. 13 Wayne met with Calderón on September 6 2012. Calderón said to be “very disturbed” about the incident and promised to carry out an independent investigation. U.S. Embassy declassified cable, September 7, 2012.

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Do you think the intention was to create tensions between the two countries?

We never had any evidence of anything like that. It was either they thought they were kidnapers, or the police were linked to criminal activities themselves.

Was it the worst crisis you faced in almost four years as ambassador?

It was the one that endangered peoples lives the most. The capture and escape of El Chapo was another one.¹⁴ And also a number of the press stories that emerged, especially in *The New York Times*, that were not accurate and were difficult to manage. At least one of those was during the beginning of the Peña years.

The one about the General Moisés García Ochoa?¹⁵

Yes.

It's not true?

It's not true, that's why we issued a denial. It was a distortion of the truth. The irony of the gentleman that we allegedly said we didn't want in the Peña Administration was actually quite pro-American. The version that we had vetoed him was just not true. I have no doubt somebody told the journalist (Ginger Thompson) that, but they misled her.¹⁶

With what purpose?

I think it's somebody who maybe had partial understanding of what had been going on and led her in the wrong direction.

Did you have concerns about who could be in the Peña Nieto cabinet?

I'd have to think about that. I mean certainly there were individuals that might have been concerning. I think the way to look at the issue is: Peña and his advisors wanted to make sure they didn't bring into the government someone that the U.S. government had very negative information about on ties to criminal activities and that was not known to the incoming government. It's a little bit different from the assumption that the United States

14. 14 On July 11, 2015, México most-wanted drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, escaped from a maximum-security prison near Mexico City.
15. 15 It was believed that General García Ochoa could be promoted to become secretary of defense. Drug Enforcement Administration had suspicions that he had links to drug trafficking. "Hand of U.S. is Seen in Halting General's rise in Mexico," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2013.
16. 16 Ginger Thompson, "U.S. Embassy Denies Intervening in Mexico Cabinet Choice," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2013.

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vetoed somebody. When you are vetting candidates for public office, you often ask if you know something bad or have something worrisome about that person.

There can be different ways to veto.

I can definitively say we vetoed nobody.

How was your relation with Peña Nieto in comparison to Calderón?

It was a good relationship. Peña was well informed on a number of issues. We talked about a range of different things. Calderón would explore the details and the ins and outs of issues. I'd say that wasn't Peña's style. We would talk about broader subjects that were going on, not the detailed ins and outs of what was happening. With Calderón we would talk through the heads of different cartels and how do we get this or that cartel, their strong points and weak points. It was a much broader level of conversation with Peña. He did not get into as many of the details.

What did you talk about with Peña?

We would talk about big issues like the importance of developing the economic relationship and how we could do that. We would talk about solidifying the cooperation among the various parts of both governments in the struggle against crime, making sure the ministries were working with each other. He was quite willing to sort difficulties if there were problems of communication or just some parts of the government that weren't being cooperative, but he did not get into as many details and specifics as Calderón did.

Why?

I don't know. I think that's the way he governed. Calderón was sometimes accused of being a micro-manager of things and people. I understand where that might come from. I never saw that per se, but I can see that he liked to master, to

understand, the details of what he was doing. He would go back and forth and explore them, and that was his way of making a decision and learning. President Peña Nieto would deal with the broad outlines of policy and if there was a problem he would go and focus on that, but he delegated to his ministers to be in charge of the specific implementing policies and that is just a different style of leadership and management.

How would you describe Peña Nieto?

As a very congenial and pleasant person. He was enjoyable to talk and work with.

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Did you find his foreign policy more open?

President Peña was open to taking further cooperation in foreign policy, which traditionally has not been Mexico's priority. It's been, "don't interfere in those other countries, leave us alone, sometimes we'll play on foreign policy but not always." Peña was open to exploring all of that because he was committed to the strategic partnership and to the importance of the relationship with the United States. He liked the idea of building the relationship, not in any one area, but in economics, in education, in entrepreneurship, and in foreign policy cooperation. The same thing was true regarding North America cooperation. We would have very good conversations about that potential.

Did you get the sense that he was dependent on Videgaray?¹⁷

Luis Videgaray is an extremely intelligent, capable individual. He was doubtless the source of many good ideas. But Aurelio Nuño¹⁸ was also very thoughtful. José Antonio Meade¹⁹ was very experienced, very thoughtful and very wise in a lot of things. There were a number of people who were helping with the specific issues who were smart, intelligent, experienced. President Peña Nieto's style was as a big picture guy and a strategy guy. From the start he decided he was going to delegate most everything to his different ministers. He did that with Osorio Chong²⁰ in *gobernación*, with Videgaray in finance and with Caldwell²¹ in *energía*. So that's the way he ran things.

Did you find Peña Nieto well informed?

I could have very intelligent conversations with him. Whenever he was in meetings with our leaders, he was very well informed and engaged. I remember one conversation in which he raised with Obama the whole notion of having to get better at dealing with heroin and opioid flows, because Mexico's services were detecting more heroin heading into the U.S. from Mexico. From that conversation they agreed to set up a senior bilateral

17. 17 Secretary of Finance and Public Credit, 2012-2016.

18. 18 Chief of Staff of the Presidency, 2012-2015.

19. 19 Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 2012-2015.

20. 20 Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, Secretary of *Gobernación*.

21. 21 Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, Secretary of Energy, 2012-2018.





Earl Anthony Wayne and Barack Obama in the White House. *White House Photo Archives*.

working group which we hadn't had before specifically focused on heroin and opioid flows. That was an excellent step forward which I supported. But, in general, it was at that bigger strategic issue that he would focus.

*Why did Peña Nieto's economic reforms did not "save Mexico" as some people predicted?*²²

The initial reforms steps, which Peña and his team formulated before he got into government, were good. They mobilized an extremely impressive coalition to support the reforms, got them passed and started to implement them--all very successful. But some of that reform package, not all of it, got bogged down in implementation. The energy and telecommunications reforms started yielding very good results for Mexico, even though they're going to take a long time. The education reform was really needed to help young Mexicans. Mexico has the lowest rating in the OECD countries for the quality of its education. But the reform got bogged down in the very complicated issues of union politics among the teachers. It's going to be hard to change that education system, but it's vital for Mexico's future that it be done. On the security front, the Peña Administration came in

²² According to *Time* magazine's "Saving Mexico" cover story, Peña Nieto's "sweeping" economic reforms changed the narrative in his "narco-stained nation." Michael Crowley, February 24, 2014.

riding on the results of a very successful effort by Calderón to get the cartels on the run. The violence under Calderón peaked in December of 2011 or January of 2012 and then started down. Violence and homicides continued down until 2014. That was in good part because the Calderón Administration had made a lot of investment in the law enforcement institutions and the practices.

Did it change under Peña?

That was continued by the Peña Administration, but they didn't make adjustments to keep effectively fighting the criminality as criminality changed form, as more smaller groups popped up. They didn't invest enough in strengthening the state level forces to arrest the criminal group lieutenants so they couldn't operate in that state or somewhere else. The violence kept growing and growing and spreading geographically. During the Calderón years the violence was largely concentrated in certain areas where the drug cartels were fighting to control routes for access to the United States. That crime-related violence has now spread widely across Mexico. And its no longer just fighting over drugs that is violent. It never was totally, but serious violence from criminal groups has now spread to all sorts of areas, including extortion, kidnapping, and oil theft, among other areas. The criminals have completely overwhelmed or influenced and bought out many local authorities, so the federal government now has a tremendously difficult task on its hands, and the public saw that. Along with the increased violence, there was never any effective effort to deal with public corruption during my years working with the Peña Administration.

There are three things that changed the initial positive perception of the Peña Administration: the corruption scandal around the so-called "Casa Blanca,"²³ the disappearance of 43 students²⁴ and El Chapo's prison escape. Do you agree?

Yes, I agree. I think almost all the good work, undertaking these very important reforms early in the Peña Administration, got swept away in the public perception because of not handling forcefully the corruption cases that arose, the disappearance and presumed killings

23. 23 The scandal broke in November 2014 when the news website *Aristegui Noticias* revealed that a subsidiary of the company Grupo Higa had built a very large residence designed specifically for Peña Nieto's family. The mansion, in an exclusive part of the capital, was built shortly before he was elected president in 2012, while he was governor of Mexico State.

24. 24 On September 26, 2014, 43 male students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College were forcibly abducted and then disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero. They were allegedly taken into custody by local police officers from Cocula and Iguala, in collusion with organized crime.

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of the 43 students and then the El Chapo escape from a high security federal prison. In the first two instances, I believe the government could have dealt with the challenges with more serious and honest investigations. The El Chapo case was an easier. There was corruption involved in allowing him to escape, but they were able to find him again. They could do that through targeted intelligence and law enforcement work and by using the more trusted Mexican law enforcement officials that they knew were well vetted. They worked with Americans to get information so that the Mexicans could carry out the law enforcement operations, because we don't carry our law enforcement operations in Mexico. But that was the simplest only in a sense. It was really disturbing when the escape happened. I remember getting the call and letting out a few expletives even though it was a Sunday morning.

The call was from the DEA?

Yes. It was not only frustrating for them, however. We had trained all the staff of that prison²⁵ on best practices using Mérida programs. When we subsequently heard that the prisoners were hearing digging sounds and telling the guards about it and the guards were doing nothing, we knew they must have bought everybody out, or they threatened everybody. Corruption is not just you get paid off, it is sometimes, "We know where your kids are and if you say anything you're not going to see them anymore." It was very, very frustrating. After that, we all launched a 100 percent search for finding information to locate El Chapo. It was not easy but eventually it led to his re-capture.

Why was there no serious investigation on the missing 43 students?

I don't know. You'd have to ask the Mexicans. All I know is there wasn't, and we shared that we didn't think it was. But, you know, it's a Mexican domestic investigation.

Did you conduct your own investigation?

Nope. We don't carry out criminal investigations in another country. We provided help to the government of Mexico, forensic and expert help, and they conducted the investigation and any needed law enforcement operations.

Why do you say the Casa Blanca scandal could have been delt better?

I think it was an opportunity for the Peña Administration to become a champion in fighting corruption. Cases like the Casa Blanca where wrong appears to have been one, one

²⁵ The Altiplano is a maximum-security federal prison near Mexico City.

should try to turn them to one's advantage by creating an effort to go against corruption and make sure things similar don't happen again. As people said at the time, "Well, there weren't any rules against this kind of stuff." So, make rules to fight corruption going forward. Don't let people do it any more. Move aggressively and if people are found doing it in the future, make them pay a price. How many anti-corruption convictions were there in those years? None.

Was the Peña Administration insensible to the public uproar over corruption?

I believe the government needed to launch a really sincere effort to fight corruption. It was particularly damaging for the government because you could just see in Mexican civil society this rising 'we're not going to accept this any more'

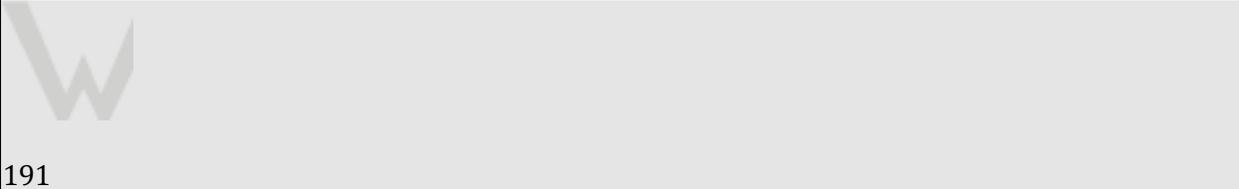
attitude. People were just more and more fed up with corruption at all levels. You pay the policeman off so you don't get the ticket. But people were increasingly angry about that kind of daily corruption. "We're right next to a country where you get thrown in jail. Doesn't mean there's no corruption, but you have a chance of getting thrown in jail, so why aren't more people getting thrown in jail here." You could see it on Facebook. You could just see this dynamic growing in civil society of Mexicans being fed up with this level of corruption.

Did you discuss it with Peña?

It was discussed. Nobody said no. We, on a regular basis, kept saying we should find ways to handle this corruption issue not just with President Peña, but with other members of the cabinet as well. But the actual policy on handling corruption is the decision of an independent government. The people of Mexico wouldn't want the American ambassador dictating to Mexico what the government do.

Did you offer help to fight corruption?

What you do is you can make suggestions. We offered various ideas, for example, to bring experts to talk about corruption, to help set best practices in the United States on public disclosures people have to make in the federal government; to bring people to Mexico who do investigations in the United States for inspectors general of agencies and other public organizations so Mexican officials could see how you could put such a system in place. And some of that sharing did go on, but was not to the degree that might have made a difference in popular perception. The biggest challenge, from my perspective, was that there weren't any convictions for corruption. There was just no evidence that the office of the attorney general was going after corruption.



Did you share with the Peña Administration cases of corruption?

In the justice conversations and channels there was a lot of exchange of information and discussion of cases. There were a number of cases brought in the United States against Mexican officials for corruption. In fact, there were more cases brought for corruption of Mexican officials in the United States than there were in Mexico. When you're working with

another governments, you're a partner, you don't tell them what to do, you can suggest ideas, you can offer to work with them, you can offer assistance, but the officials of Mexico have to decide what they would like to do.

Did you address with Peña concerns about human rights and impunity?

We had a regular dialogue with the foreign ministry and *gobernación* on human rights. We would tell them when we thought there were violations that they should have dealt with. We would do this privately. We would do it with military services, and our military would talk to them about it also. We would try to have dialogues and discussions in a very respectful way. We offered assistance. For example, we provided support to establish a dialogue between the government and NGOs working in the human rights area. We funded an NGO to be a mediator to bring together *gobernación* and the human rights NGOs to find ways to work together on the protection of individuals (journalists) and on specific cases. I would bring these topics up with federal officials and also with the governors when there were cases of what looked like very egregious killings or human rights abuses that involved, not federal officials, but state or local officials. And we did have this dialogue talking about military events too. According to U.S. law, we can't have military exchanges of any kind with units that have been tainted by human rights abuses. We did discuss these issues very frankly with both military services (Army and Navy), including at the highest level. We ended up after several years of building trust and confidence having very good discussions. We were able to find ways to discuss these issues and it had to do with building trust and confidence.

Was the Navy the branch of the armed forces you trusted the most?

Well, I don't know that I'd want to say that. We had good cooperation with both the Navy and the Army. But what I will say is that both the Navy and the Marines particularly were the most active elements in the efforts to go after capos in general. They were disciplined, very highly skilled and very well trained. We did provide them training and other things. They were the elements that the government of Mexico chose to use regularly. So, we worked with them and had consistently good collaboration.

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Is the Mérida Initiative and the war on drugs a failed strategy?

The war on drugs was launched by President Nixon in the early 1970s. We now have a massive addiction crisis in the United States. Clearly, it has not been successful. Have there been parts of it that have been successful along the way? Yes. Should there be a reexamination of the take-the-capo-out strategy? Yes. Does it mean you never do that? No, it doesn't, but you do have to look at what happens when you do it. Were the lieutenants in the organization arrested or were they left to roam freely in society and try to make money any way they can? To use violence and steal what they can or kidnap people and get other money? Do you need a justice system that actually convicts people? Yes, you do. Is the United States system perfect? No, it is not.

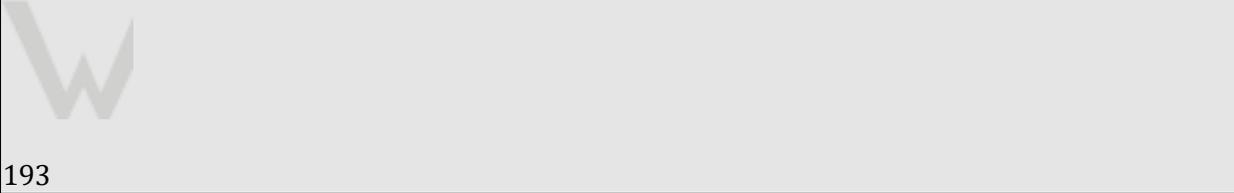
What about the finger-pointing that goes on?

Clearly a lot of drugs get into the United States and travel all over the country. If they come across the Mexican border they still get to Boston or Vermont or San Francisco or Seattle. So yeah, there are problems in the United States too. Do you need to keep working on fixing that? Yes, you do. You need to be smart and that means you need to regularly review what's working and what isn't and try and figure out why it's not working.

Is using the military to fight cartels working?

Well, the military worked at finding select individuals that Mexico was targeting. But it was not enough. Were there violations of human rights, errors, people killed that shouldn't have been? Yes. So, what do you do? You try and keep perfecting the system and processes for their involvement. It's important to remember that the Mérida Initiative was not just about the capo strategy. In fact, it was about trying to train people to professional standards. It was about trying to make sure that Mexico had forensic experts that actually knew how to collect the evidence and present it. It was about having police standards, salaries, training and advancement people could be honorable policemen for 25 years and be respected. It was about having youth centers in Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Monterrey that got young people from these endangered neighborhoods to come in and have other activities than to just hang out with the gangs. All these were good things. Did they get followed up on? Did they get expanded? Did they become institutionalized practices? That's where the problems arose.

What now?



I believe strongly that what needs to happen on a regular basis now is you actually have to have both sides sit down and have a really honest review of what's working and not working. In the United States that means we have to spend more money on addiction programs and prevention programs. No question about that. The solution is not to say it's been a failure and that we are going to stop doing things together. You can't do that. You've to try to refine what you are doing and get better results.

Did the release from jail of Caro Quintero created tensions in the relationship?²⁶

It did. Somebody got bought off. It was a surprise to us when he was released. It's an example of targeted efforts to use corruption to get people free. It works, sometimes.

Would you say corruption is part of Mexico's culture?

I wouldn't say its part of the Mexican culture per sé. The Mexican culture is much deeper and broader than that, but it is part of the Mexican practice for many recent decades and unless you have consequences for this kind of practice it's going to spread. In the United States, we have corruption, we probably have too much corruption, but we do have checks and balances. People do get caught, periodically, and they get brought to trial, and they get thrown in jail for doing it. You've got to have deterrent, checks against this normal temptation of humans. Sadly, as a group, we seem to be that way. Mexico just haven't had that set of deterrents. It gets back to impunity. If you have impunity, how are you going to stop things like corruption. It's not just you're not going to stop homicides or robberies with words or even arrests. You're not going to stop any of this criminal activity if there is impunity. The justice system doesn't work well. That's one of the very sad things about the Mexican justice reform.

Why sad?

The justice reform was initiated because the Mexican justice system was convicting a lot of innocent people, and law enforcement elements were using torture to get confessions. People would sit in jail falsely accused, and finally after three years they'd get their hearing and they would get out. That helped spur justice reform. But the reform was being very poorly implemented, so criminals are getting out. That is really frustrating. You've got

26 Caro Quintero, the co-founder of the now-disintegrated Guadalajara Cartel, accused of ordering the kidnapping and killing of a DEA agent, was freed from jail on August 9, 2013 by a state court in Guadalajara. His release outraged the Obama Administration. After 9 years as a fugitive, Caro Quintero was finally arrested July 15, 2022. The U.S. has asked for his extradition.

to do these things well, and early. You've got to examine how they're going forward and make corrections along the way. I do not believe that Mexicans are innately more corrupt or more violent or more criminal. They are not. But if you don't have a functional system, there are certain members of society that will do those bad things. Some of them will do it anyway, but there's another group that won't do it if there's no impunity, if the law enforcement and justice systems provide deterrence.

Did Secretaries Clinton and Kerry have the same level of interest on Mexico?

Clinton was more engaged. It's not that Secretary Kerry thought Mexico wasn't important, but his "these are important" list was a lot longer. Secretary Kerry was always going around the whole world. He came one time to Mexico when I was there and had a very good visit. Secretary Clinton did travel a lot, but she had come to understand early on in her tenure that Mexico is really important--even before I was asked to be ambassador--that Mexico has these really big challenges and it's important that we pay attention. What we did do in those second term years with Kerry in the Obama Administration is we developed something called the High-Level Economic Dialogue, with the secretary of commerce and the secretary of homeland security playing key roles. They filled in that attention gap and showed that it didn't need to be the foreign minister.

Alot of what we do in Mexico is something called "intermestic," it's international and domestic at the same time. Mexico is our second largest client in the world. So, from the secretary of commerce's point of view, if she wants to support the American economy, she needs to support the relationship with Mexico and Canada. Penny Pritzker²⁷ did that. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson also saw that this is a tremendously important relationship. He made regular visits to Mexico. We regularly worked on the border, and it was a combination of enforcement and facilitation. It was a two-way thing. You want legitimate traffic and legitimate commerce to go fast, but you also want to stop the illegitimate stuff. Secretary Johnson and his predecessor, Janet Napolitano, knew how important relations with Mexico were, and they realized that it wasn't just about enforcement, it was about facilitation of legitimate trade and transport. They came regularly to work on that and so did Penny Pritzker.

The High-Level Economic Dialogue, who's idea was it?

²⁷ Secretary of Commerce, 2013-2017.

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We started raising the idea that we needed an overarching economic relationship, and not just covering economics and trade, but also things like education and promoting innovation between the countries. We needed ways to help tie the two countries together in constructive ways. After a good deal of discussion, we came out with this idea of a high-level economic dialogue that can deal with that. My hunch is that President Obama asked Vice President Biden if he could help out and pull this all together. Vice President Biden agreed to chair it, but the two driving forces in the cabinet were Penny Pritzker and Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson. John Kerry, Secretary of Treasury Jack Lew and others would also participate. Same thing on the Mexican side. By combining security and economics, we created a big umbrella to actually address the whole range of issues that either could divide or unite Mexico and the United States. Finance Minister Luis Videgaray was the driving force on the Mexican side.

Was it successful?

It made it a lot easier to deal with the difficult issues because you have these win-win issues out there that you were working on at the same time. If there was a problem it was dealt with in the context of a number of other beneficial issues. You could help solve the problem and still be working together positively on a number of other issues. This actually created the most comprehensive working relationship between the United States and Mexico we had during these years. That was a change in mentality. It wasn't that way when I first arrived, it was people pointing and saying, "Well, they're the ones at fault, they caused it, no, no you caused it." We got beyond that for those years.

Did you meet with the 2012 presidential candidates in the Embassy?

Not in the embassy, but in my house or a neutral place. I talked to them about all the things we were doing with the bilateral relationship and about how important the relationship was. I discussed the work on economics and on security. I told them that we hoped to continue and deepen that relationship. I had run into some of them ahead of time at other events, but we hadn't had serious discussions. They were all good conversations, including with López Obrador, and in that case, we had a lunch together at a place that was neutral. Somebody's apartment.

Whose apartment?

Somebody.

What's the name of that somebody?



Héctor Vasconcelos²⁸ organized the lunch as his diplomatic advisor.

Were you concerned about any of the leading 2012 candidates?

No. We weren't particularly concerned about any of the candidates, or the elections. But it was pretty clear that the PRI was going to win.

Did you give press conferences?

I gave a bunch of interviews. I didn't use Twitter, but we used Facebook a lot. We grew our Facebook followers from about 5-10,000 when I first got there to almost a million when I left.

Were your decisions have to be cleared with Washington?

We had a fair amount of autonomy. Nowadays is very easy to communicate with Washington about the kinds of things we were going to do. Emailing them or just copying them on messages. We would run our days by ourselves. It was only if there was some big issue, we would coordinate fully ahead of time at more senior levels. If we needed, for example, if there was big public issue, we would want to coordinate with Washington. Or, if the issue involved the military, we would coordinate with the U.S. Northern Command, so we're saying the same thing, because if you don't say the same thing you get in trouble, so we would coordinate. There were big issues that we would want to have a discussion with Washington and with other agencies in Washington to figure out how to handle it.

Can you give examples of those instances?

One example is when El Chapo Guzmán escaped from jail. We immediately started calling everybody around the U.S. interagency to have a coordinated response. We knew that that people would start giving their unilateral impressions of it. It was necessary to have all the U.S. centers of authority saying something pretty consistent. We would also coordinate things with the government of Mexico. Coordinating between the two governments was not the practice when I first went to Mexico.

Did you also coordinate what to say after the ambush of CIA?

Yes, we did. On key things like that we worked to make sure not that we had to say exactly the same thing, but that we talked to one another and understood what we were each going to say about it.

28 Senator for Morena, López Obrador's party.

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Who were your contacts in Washington?

It was Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, or her principal deputy. It was also the senior director of the National Security Council which was Ricardo Zúñiga. First it was Dan Restrepo, then it was Zúñiga. For a while it was also White House Homeland Security Director and then CIA Director John Brennan. He had a big interest in Mexico on security issues. We would coordinate with the CIA. When I first arrived to Mexico, the CIA Director was David Petraeus. I had worked with him very closely in Afghanistan so I knew him very well. Before he became CIA Director, he and Bob Zoellick wrote a report on the importance of North America for the Council on Foreign Relations. Petraeus very much knew how important Mexico was to the United States.

Did you have many official visitors when you were ambassador?

Yes, it was good to have all those people come in. It was one of the things that you learned. That this relationship is not just a federal-to-federal relationship. We were regularly getting governors and businessmen visiting. Governor Jerry Brown came down from California. He invited Peña Nieto to go up to California. I went up with Peña Nieto for that visit in July of 2014. This state and city level connection is a really important part of the Mexico-U.S. relationship that needs to be regularly strengthened and given attention.

Was there anything that struck you from Obama's visits to Mexico?

What struck me was how popular he was with Mexicans. I remember the first time he went to Mexico City, we were surprised by these big crowds of people that came out to welcome his motorcade on the streets completely unorganized. He was just very popular.

What did Obama say?

I remember riding over with him in his limousine to dinner with Peña Nieto at Los Pinos. That was exciting, just riding in that big limousine and talking to him on the way over about Mexico and Peña Nieto. He was interested in what's happening with politics, what's Peña doing, what's he going to do.

How did you handle the lack of security for American tourists as described in the State Department's travel warnings?

One of the things we did while I was there was to make sure to go to the level of the states in describing the security situation, and even different parts of the states, so that the warning system could allow readers to understand which parts were really danger-

ous and not just think all of Mexico is dangerous. We tried to be as specific as possible so people could still enjoy certain areas, but with others, they would know not to go there.

I saw a picture of you on a bicycle. What was that about?

That was just to support the use of bicycles in Mexico City. I rode from the embassy over to our library, Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin, on my bike with my bodyguards on bikes following me. It was fun!

Did you have body guards?

All the time. That's one of the difficult things about being an ambassador.

How many?

Six at a time, including the driver. They were very nice gentlemen, but it's not nice to go everywhere with six people all the time. We actually had fewer security personnel in Afghanistan because one didn't want to attract attention. There would be two cars, four (bodyguards), two in each car, all American personnel.

Are there certain security restrictions for American diplomats in Mexico?

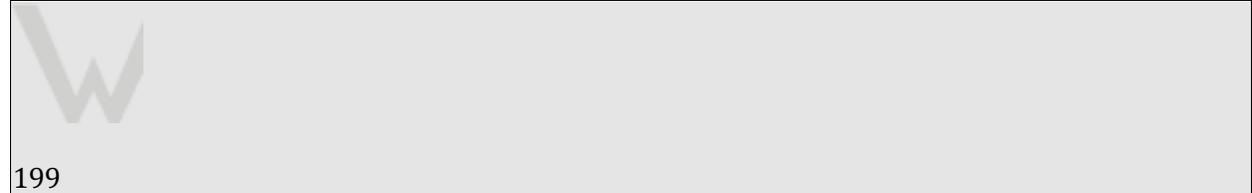
There are in certain cities, but in Mexico City we don't have any restrictions like that. The security team decided that since I was the ambassador, I could be a target.

Did you continue sending confidential cables to Washington after Wikileaks?

Yes, but you're just careful about what you write and about the channels in which you send things, but yes there's still plenty of reporting that goes on.

Are there fixed parameters that define the relationship with Mexico?

I would say there are main axes of relations that remain the same, but as we've seen over the past year and a half you can do different things with those axes. What remains constant is the importance of the collaboration between the two countries on economics, on security, and on people-to-people issues. That's because there are so many people that cross the border that have ties in both directions. So much trade--a million dollars a minute on average--goes back and forth. And because we share such a long border, the security issues regarding drugs, other kinds of crime and potential terrorism, are just not going to go away. None of those are going to change in the foreseeable future. You can change the atmosphere, and change the extent of the cooperation, but there are other things that you



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do just have to do. You have to manage that border. If you don't manage it well it's going to be very costly on both sides of the border, for example.

What is your contribution or legacy?

Helping to bring together a lot of different areas of collaboration and cooperation. Expanding greatly the number of students who were going up the United States. It was a big. Several hundred thousand Mexicans eventually went to the United States for short term study to learn English. The High-Level Economic Dialogue and law enforcement cooperation was working a lot better than it did before. People having more trust with each other. We crossed all of those areas and many others. We actually had a lot of good discussion and good work. That was, I think, my big contribution. Bringing people together and being a successful entrepreneur of cooperation and collaboration.

Was Mexico your biggest challenge in your diplomatic career?

Well, it was my biggest mission, by far. Afghanistan was a pretty big challenge, and it was very intense every day in a threatening way, in a way that you often felt that you were in danger. Mexico was a much bigger challenge in that

magnitude of the relationship was so much greater and touched so many people's lives potentially. There are so many actors that you had to give a lot of thought and attention to your strategy, tactics and responses. You had to try to anticipate as best you could what might happen, and you had to be ready to respond immediately if something did happen to mitigate negative effects. So, I guess, I would say yes. Certainly, me being solely in charge of the U.S. embassy and mission was the biggest challenge I faced.

Your greatest satisfaction?

Seeing people prospering whether they were business people now having new markets, students coming three months to the United States happy they could now speak English more fluently, entrepreneurs that had now gotten an "angel" funder to help them with their idea and NGOs that felt they could now have a little more support for fighting for transparency or fighting for a free press and protecting journalists. All that was enjoyable and very rewarding.

Any regrets?

No, I don't think so.