In the Shadow of the Superpower

Interview by Arturo Rocha with Soledad Loaeza[1]

Arturo Rocha: Among her extensive work, the most recent book by Dr. Soledad Loaeza delves into the Cold War to analyze the influence of the United States on Mexican presidentialism. The first of two volumes, *In the Shadow of the Superpower. Three Mexican Presidents in the Cold War, 1945-1958* (A la sombra de la superpotencia. Tres presidentes mexicanos en la Guerra Fría, 1945-1958, Mexico, El Colegio de Mexico, 2022, 470 pp.), sheds light on the dynamic adaptation of Mexican presidentialism in response to U.S. influence. The author argues that the presidential system of the hegemonic party was a self-defense mechanism against its proximity to the world's leading military and industrial power.

Within the framework of the two hundred years of shared history between Mexico and the United States, Loaeza describes the evolution of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America and, specifically, towards Mexico. The emeritus researcher explores the theme after the end of the Cold War and analyzes the current context following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing international presence of China. She evaluates the role of the United States in the democratization of Mexico, and also notices its excesses to date.

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Why did you choose World War II and the postwar period (Manuel Ávila Camacho, 1940-1946; Miguel Alemán, 1946-1952, and Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, 1952-1956) in order to study the influence of the United States on Mexico?

Soledad Loaeza: It is a coincidence, it was a surprise that the documents prepared for me. I began by studying President Díaz Ordaz, and when I reviewed his six-year term, I found that relations with the United States had been quite complex. This was a moment in which the United States was asserting its dominance, its hegemony, over Latin America—at the same time that it is involved in the Vietnam War.

We must not forget that in 1964 the United States fostered a coup against President Goulart in Brazil. In 1965, it sent troops to the Dominican Republic. This was a time of great intolerance in the United States for anything that threatened to alter the *status quo* in the region. This was something that President Díaz Ordaz was very much aware of. He met with President Johnson nine times during his six-year term, a fact that caught my attention.

Above all, I focused on internal politics. *In the Shadow of the Superpower* is my first study of international politics, even though it still focuses on internal politics, because my interest is the institutional development of the Mexican presidency. However, when reviewing the research material, I realized that the influence of the United States in the process of formation of Mexican presidentialism was very important in those years.

The United States had been a difficult neighbor for Mexico, always much more powerful. But in 1945 Mexico finds itself beside a giant, a superpower. It is the first industrial and military power; a country with a terrifying nuclear weapon. What is Mexico going to do? We must remember that in those years the United States had 160 million inhabitants. Mexico, an agrarian country, had 20 million. While the United States had an army of three million troops, Mexico had one with fifty thousand. It is obvious that Mexico could not confront the United States. That was well understood by President Ávila Camacho.

I also found the impact of the relationship with the United States on internal affairs in the student movement of 1968. President Díaz Ordaz thought that if the United States had got involved in Brazil, it could perfectly well do so in Mexico too. He was concerned about maintaining domestic order, as this was one of the excuses used by the Americans to intervene. And then

he made the mistakes that we all know about. That variable, the presence of the United States, is a factor that must be taken into account in Mexican institutional development.

Arturo Rocha: In your book you talk about a second volume that will be dedicated to Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970). Why stop at Díaz Ordaz and not continue with Luis Echeverría?

Soledad Loaeza: In those years, from 1945 to 1970, there are many continuities. To begin with, those three presidents are Alemanists; they draw on the trajectory, the model, of the presidency of Miguel Alemán. They share their way of conceiving the State and of relating to the United States. In 1959 the Cuban Revolution erupted, and this altered the regional context. But Mexico somehow remained isolated from that influence, and political continuities were maintained until the end of the Díaz Ordaz period.

Arturo Rocha: In your book you use the case of Peron's elections in Argentina as an example of open intervention by the United States. Ambassador Spruille Braden even referred to the dichotomy: "with or without free elections, Peron will not be president, because I say so. It's me or Peron." In addition to the coup in Brazil, there was also the coup against Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. This gives the impression that there is no interventionism at this level towards Mexico, that there is a differentiated treatment. How do we explain that U.S. interference with its direct neighbor would have been less dramatic?

Soledad Loaeza: There is a very strong contrast. It all starts with Miguel Alemán. The intervention in the election of Alemán is clear and it is documented in the communications between the U.S. ambassador in Mexico and the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. The ambassador insisted on intervening and the Secretary of State, a very intelligent person, replied that there is no need to carry out any type of intervention.

If we look at the broader picture, we see that U.S. interventionism fared very badly in Brazil and Argentina. This context was a lesson: "If the countries

want to have a dictator, it is their decision; intervention makes it much worse." That attitude remains. From the Mexican perspective, the first president to realized that it is not possible to elect a candidate who would challenge the United States was Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas appointed Manuel Ávila Camacho, a moderate admirer of the United States and democracy, as his successor.

However, Ávila Camacho in turn opted for Miguel Alemán, a candidate contrary to the preference of the U.S. ambassador. At different times, the U.S. Embassy accused him of being a fascist, of being a communist, and also of being a Nazi spy. There is a suspicion that Miguel Alemán was frowned upon for refusing to cooperate against Japanese and German spies during the war. In any case, once he was already a presidential candidate, Alemán met with the first secretary of the United States Embassy, because the ambassador refuses to receive him.

It was very difficult for Alemán to face that opposition; it is also extraordinary that he managed to get around this hostility. He arrived with a very clear idea of what he wanted for the country and how to achieve it. He had a first-rate cabinet: specialists, economists, well-known people. President Truman, on a visit to Mexico, even with very bad references for the president, wrote in his diary that when he got off the plane and saw President Alemán "I immediately liked the guy."

So, Mexico has a gigantic, threatening neighbor. As a result, he recognizes that he cannot oppose the Americans. The Mexican government opted not for resistance, in the style of Arbenz, but for a collaboration that allowed it to secure advantages within that inevitable asymmetry. It is a geostrategic position, because the United States seeks to defend its security space in the scenario of a probable nuclear war. Mexico plays that card well by joining the alliance with the United States and, based on that situation of U.S. insecurity, negotiates with them.

Arturo Rocha: So it seems that the United States engages a more nuanced form of meddling, since it accepts Miguel Alemán as president as long as he adheres to the coordinates of the Cold War.

Soledad Loaeza: I don't like the word *interference* neither *meddling*, because that supposes activity. The U.S. is confident that the Mexicans will

make the right decision not to confront the giant. This was true at least until Eisenhower, who, despite having great affection for Mexico, always pointed out that if the communists came to power it would mean war.

Some in our country think that the Americans are always good: no. They act according to their interests. If their interests dictate that Mexico must be treated well, they will do so. But if their interests dictate that you have to put the boot in, they will put the boot in.

Arturo Rocha: You point out that "authoritarianism was a deliberate defense strategy against an inordinately powerful neighbor and no longer just the result of power struggles within the revolutionary elite." How does authoritarianism work as a self-defense system?

Soledad Loaeza: The idea, the supposition of Ávila Camacho, was: "The United States has a veto but cannot choose." The United States was not really interested in Mexican democracy until the 1980s. But they did care about stability; today it's the same story. Nor would they have liked Mexico to be a military dictatorship. The great democracy of the world, which had defeated authoritarian regimes in Europe, would not accept its neighbor as a military dictatorship. This is very clear from State Department documents.

In the case of Mexico, the United States did not have to intervene openly for us to realize how far we could go. The two countries reached a point of equilibrium. The credible threat was enough.

Arturo Rocha: Returning to the previous idea of the contrast between Mexico and other countries, the United States tolerated union movements, popular clientelism, elements that in ideological terms orbited the Soviet sphere.

Soledad Loaeza: Not only did it tolerate that; practically all the communist congresses in Latin America took place in Mexico. There was the idea of a balance: we Mexicans knew how far to go with them and the Americans with us. There was trust to such a degree that the security for President Johnson on a visit to our country was provided by the Mexican security forces.

Arturo Rocha: It seems then that the United States had no genuine interest in the ideological promotion of liberal democracy, of the model of checks and balances. Was there a realist policy in the defense of their interests, perhaps hidden in the mask of liberalism during the Cold War, or was there an authentic promotion of the values of representative democracy?

Soledad Loaeza: It depends on at what moment we are referring to. During the Mexican transition, a long and important period of about thirty years, the United States paid close attention and did promote Mexican democratization authentically, from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan. Practically everyone wanted there to be democracy in Mexico, and I think they were sincere about that.

The years that I study are years of great rigidity, but also of international stability, with the exception of the internal crises, coups d'état and military dictatorships in the rest of Latin America, which fortunately we did not have in Mexico. My view is that we did not have a military dictatorship in Mexico thanks to the United States. Similarly, I maintain that without U.S. pressure, perhaps we would not have had elections in Mexico.

John Coatsworth, the great American historian who knows Mexico very well, said that the fate of Mexican democracy depends on the United States. I do believe this; it is what I saw. The United States, during the Cold War, was not so interested in democracy. Later, they came to believe that democracy in Mexico suited them.

Arturo Rocha: Going a little beyond the timeframe of the book, what happens between the fall of the Berlin Wall and Russia's invasion of Crimea, and then mainland Ukraine? How would you describe the foreign policy of the United States in that period? Did they perhaps seek greater economic influence, since they had more or less won the ideological battle?

Soledad Loaeza: I think there is a total indifference. Just look, for example, at President Obama's hostile attitude toward Mexico and toward all Latin Americans. The presence of the United States can have a very important stabilizing effect in the region; likewise, it can be destabilizing. It all depends on the context we are referring to.

Arturo Rocha: The first part of the statement is somewhat controversial, because, deep down, it speaks of a kind of paternalism. Obviously their history includes the federalists, a system of checks and balances, two centuries of democratic governments, but why would they have to come to the region, as if we were children, to show us how a liberal democracy works?

Soledad Loaeza: Because if not, we bring populist leaders to power.

Arturo Rocha: I don't want to digress, but sometimes these leaders have significant support in the region, in addition to representing popular majorities *vis-à-vis* the elites.

Soledad Loaeza: This is another type of discussion. The issue is the tension between the democratic principle and the capacity of government. That is a very strong tension, especially in the case of Latin America. Of course they are democratic, of course they are the majority. But, who comes to power with Evo Morales, Pedro Castillo, the teacher from Nicaragua or the comrade from Venezuela?

Arturo Rocha: The opposite can also happen. For example, while acknowledging the unacceptable violations of human rights, putting a person in charge of a country without any democratic legitimacy, because they have not been elected to that position, while engaging in a whole international campaign to support someone who does not have any de facto power is problematic at best.

Soledad Loaeza: It's a dilemma. It is a tension that Europeans also experienced, not only us. Remember that democracy in the 19th century was an insult: chaos, anarchy, mob rule, disorder. This remained the case even into the 1930s. The Europeans found a completely pragmatic solution. Let's recall that governments in 1945 were mainly *de facto* governments.

Who chose Charles de Gaulle but Charles de Gaulle? Who elected the Czech or Polish government after the war? It was the armed groups that said "I sit in this seat." They had to respond to pressure from the United States to form a democracy, but also solve the daily problems of the population.

At the end of the war, not all countries wanted to be democratic, democracy did not have such a good reputation. Ultimately, it was the Weimar democracy that had been defeated by National Socialism. But, in the end, democracy was the only thing that worked.

Arturo Rocha: Returning to the present discussion, what would you call the new period of confrontation between the United States and Russia or China, for example? Is it a continuation of the Cold War? And what are the main features of U.S. foreign policy in this new phase?

Soledad Loaeza: There is a reorganization of the international order, without a doubt. At the moment it is still in a state of fluidity. We don't know what is going to happen in Europe, if the war is going to spread or they will be able to contain it, finally sitting at the negotiating table—which I think is what will end up happening—with many costs, particularly for Ukraine because the war is being fought there. The European Union has held together so far, but we have to see if this unity will hold up given the pressures of Russian gas and the need for Ukrainian wheat.

Then there's the rise of China, a perfectly authoritarian regime symbolized in one man. They are not ready to budge one inch politically. It is a hegemonic power that reflects a political model that may be attractive for many other countries, especially in Asia. This international system is going to be in flux for several years.

We must also consider that the Russian army has proven to be weak. The Cold War was founded on the idea that the Soviet Union and the United States were more or less symmetrical powers in military terms. When the Soviet Union fell, and files and documents were opened, the Americans realized that they were acting on false assumptions regarding their military apparatus, except for nuclear power. There was a lot of *bluff* by the Soviets in terms of war capability. Now they cannot hide that they have a weak and ill-prepared army. That will prevent a new cold war. Russia does not have the resources and the United States knows it.

Meanwhile, the United States is not able to exercise power as it did in the past. This makes me think that they will look at Latin America again, a continent with interesting resources and raw materials that have not been

exploited. I think we are going to move to another period where the United States is going to accept itself as a hemispheric power.

Arturo Rocha: You said that Obama had a negative view of Latin America, but the then Vice President Biden visited the region sixteen times, four of them to Mexico. Why do you perceive that mistrust or indifference on the part of former President Obama, and how would you interpret the relationship of Biden, who is now in the Oval Office, with Mexico and Latin America?

Soledad Loaeza: Disinterest in Latin America is not new in the United States. It arrived with Kissinger at the head of the National Security Council. Kissinger had a totally hierarchical vision of international politics: at the top are the superpowers, then there are the Europeans. Latin America was like the lowest rung. That's when things started to go wrong for us, because of his indifference.

Later there were moments of crisis in which eyes turned towards Mexico; with the debt crisis, for example. The United States was very committed to its interests in Mexico. They knew that the tequila crisis had the potential to spread to all of Latin America and be very destabilizing. That is to say, tipping points had to arise for them to turn to look at Mexico.

In the case of Obama, beginning with the fact that there was already this lack of interest in relation to Latin America, there was a mistrust in play. Not that he had a bad opinion, but his attitude was not exactly Eisenhower's.

Arturo Rocha: But then, what does Mexico want? It seems that interference or influence threaten us due to the asymmetry of power, but we don't like indifference either.

Soledad Loaeza: Mexico's relationship with the United States has changed a lot over the last thirty years. basing ourselves on what happened forty years ago, with the nationalist policies, is a mistake for several reasons. First, the United States is no longer a strange country for 90% of Mexicans. How many Mexicans have relatives in the United States? It is a country that is very familiar to us. We are not talking about Portugal.

That's not the only thing. American popular culture is pervasive. This is unstoppable, and not just in Mexico. It is attractive on many levels and to many people. Rappers attract the attention of certain social groups, while other groups are fascinated by American novelists.

Arturo Rocha: I get the impression, after reading your book, that there are some defense mechanisms that we should pay attention to. I would put three on the table. In the first place, the deep-rooted multilateral vocation of Mexico, designed to leave the bilateral plane behind and get closer to the United States, together with other countries. Recently, for example, we have presented some initiatives regarding the war in Ukraine from the Security Council, together with France.

Soledad Loaeza: The disadvantage of multilateralism is that we have to negotiate with others, although the asymmetry is such that we must do so. Until Echeverría, Mexico was alone with the United States. Mexico did not want to enter into multilateralism, because it implies negotiating its own position in order to work with others.

Arturo Rocha: I don't think you can take perfect lessons from history, but we also have an obligation to try to learn from the past. The multilateral system, the Estrada Doctrine itself, and the evolution of the presidential system that you describe are defense mechanisms against the superpower. Going forward, should Mexico continue to use them while simultaneously navigating the bilateral plane?

Soledad Loaeza: We have to look at what we have already achieved as Mexicans, in the past. We have achieved many things, because we negotiated with the Americans with intelligence, patience and reflection. We didn't immediately give them what they wanted. It is a mistake to believe that previous governments gave up everything. We have defended Mexican interests.

There were issues where the Americans were not willing to negotiate, and others where the Mexicans were not willing to negotiate. But there were many others where we could. We have to be very clear about what those issues are. In what cooperation programs are we interested in having

the support of the Americans? In education, or in research, for example. We are going to avail of the advantages that the relationship can offer us, and be more careful in those areas that impact and harm us. But it's not all the same, not everything harms us.