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How is the U.S. intervention in Iraq making Mexicans nervous?

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Mexico Wonders: Are We Next?

By [Lawrence Herzog](#) | Saturday, January 01, 2000

Mexicans have always expressed strong emotions across the Rio Grande. But nervousness about the loss of Mexican sovereignty was probably not on that list. Until now. With increasing talk of foreign investment in Mexico's oil sector, Mexicans fear the hand of the United States. Why? It already happened in Iraq.

Blackmail!" is how Mexico City's largest newspaper, El Universal, put it in a recent screaming front page headline.

Buying immigration reform

Mexican oil, nationalized in the 1930s, has been the nation's most carefully guarded resource, along with her cultural identity. America respected this corner of Mexican sovereignty for most of the last century.

National patrimony. Oil and history. Two precious commodities Mexico shares with Iraq.

Then, out of the blue, the GOP majority on the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives approved a proposal to link a better Mexican immigration deal to opening Mexico's oil industry to foreign investment.

"First Iraq — and now this. ¿Están locos?" "Are they crazy?" ask the Mexicans.

National patrimony

Rosario Robles, the leader of the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Democrático (one of the country's three largest parties) demanded that President Vicente Fox "hitch up his trousers — and defend the national patrimony



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against U.S. pressures.”

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National patrimony. Oil and history. Two precious commodities Mexico shares with Iraq. Two endangered resources facing divergent threats from the United States.

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Protecting oil

Why would Mexicans be worried? Here is how they view the chain of events:

In April 2003, the United States seized control of Iraq. It overwhelmed the 5-million strong capital city of Baghdad, flexing the muscles of the mightiest military machine on the planet.

Almost immediately, oil production zones were secured. British and U.S. troops surrounded oil fields. Engineers and demolition experts were ferried in to systematically clear each site. Oil was safe.

The invasion of Iraq — and the sacking of its greatest historic repository — has jolted Mexicans to wonder about their northern NAFTA partner.

Looting nightmare

History, however, was not. The U.S. military — a quarter million of the world’s best armed and trained soldiers — went AWOL in Baghdad on the day looters began to brazenly ransack one of the most important artifact collections in the world, the National Museum of Iraq.

In the short span of 48 hours — without a single soldier from the victorious coalition force stepping in to stop them — thieves walked off with an estimated 170,000 priceless antiquities.

Ransacking culture

The material history of the “Cradle of Civilization” between the ancient Tigris and Euphrates rivers — cuneiform tablets with some of the first writing known to mankind, golden vases, bronze statues over 5000 years old — was allowed to vanish.

“First Iraq — and now this. ¿Están locos?” “Are they crazy?”

As the deputy director of the Iraqi museum stated about the U.S. invading force: “They protect oil ministries, but not the cultural heritage.”

For Mexicans, this is disturbing. To them, Mexico’s history, like oil, is sacred.

History is sacred

Ancient indigenous people settled here 3,000 years ago. The soul of Mexico is embedded in chronological layers of the past, arrayed across the national landscape.

It ranges from pre-Columbian pyramids on vast plateaus and ancient ceremonial towns built of white stone on the edge of the jungle, to ten and twenty-square block historic districts bathed in cobblestone and tezontle (a pinkish rock used to build colonial churches and palaces) in the center of large cities.

Voices of discontent

No wonder the sacking of the National Museum in Iraq resonated with Mexicans. A steady stream of scorn is finding its way onto the pages of daily Mexican newspapers.

Listen in: "This was not a war against a dictator, nor even a simple and horrible massacre of a town. It was the deliberate destruction of a civilization." (La Jornada)

"The Bush regime has reached levels of barbarianism not even the Nazis imagined—with the destruction of the archeological museum of Baghdad. Lost are not only the patrimony of the Iraqis, but of all humanity." (La Jornada)

Mexican oil — nationalized in the 1930s — has been the nation's most carefully guarded resource, along with her cultural identity.

Patrimony (patrimonio) is a word frequently heard in Mexico. It means oil, and it means cultural identity too.

Cultural imperialism

Indeed, "patrimonio cultural" (cultural patrimony) is an official term south of the border that has appeared in government documents and presidential decrees since the Mexican revolution.

Memo to Bush and the GOP: Forget the Alamo and back off on the Mexican oil thing.

Throughout most of the 20th century, the Mexican federal government and the president's office defended Mexican sovereignty against what they saw as a U.S. cultural invasion.

Before the 1993 signing of the NAFTA, there were almost no globally branded fast-food outlets, hotels or chain consumer stores in Mexico. They were seen as a threat to the nation's cultural identity, its patrimonio cultural.

Mexican tourism

But even in a post-NAFTA world, "cultural patrimony" cannot be written off as merely a flowery Latino phrase. It's about dollars. Ten billion of them. Tourism, Mexico's third-largest industry, nets the country some ten billion dollars in foreign revenues each year.

Tourism hangs inevitably upon Mexico's cultural character. After all, what is it that brings so many foreigners to Mexico? Its culture — music, food, art, architecture, history and natural beauty. Taken together these create a spicy mix that frames the image outsiders have of Mexico as a desirable place to visit.

The risks of globalization

History is inexorably embedded in the stone walls of Mexican identity. So any threat to it becomes a threat to the national economy.

Globalization teaches us that an event on one side of the planet can now quickly disperse to other locations across the globe.

Patrimony is a word frequently heard in Mexico. It means oil, and it means cultural identity too.

The invasion of Iraq — and the sacking of its greatest historic repository — has jolted Mexicans to wonder once again nervously about the embrace with their northern NAFTA partner.

National angst

This national angst is best summarized in a recent column by a Mexican writer, when he says in La Jornada: "The tone of the petroleum sacking by U.S. invaders and the exercise of destruction of the physical and cultural patrimony parallels another sacking: our own."

Mexico's Abe Lincoln

Foreign (read: U.S.) investment in the Mexican oil sector is not going to happen anytime soon, as President Vicente Fox has made very clear.

Globalization teaches us that an event on one side of the planet can now quickly disperse to other locations across the globe.

He knows that doing so would be political suicide to open this can of worms in the run-up to the July 2003 parliamentary election.

In fact, it is doubtful that Mexico will ever seriously open the oil industry to foreign investment, both for emotional and political reasons.

Learning to back off

Oil has been synonymous with Mexican sovereignty for nearly a century, ever since President Lazaro Cardenas — who is considered the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico — nationalized it in the 1930s.

There is a powerful symbolic linkage between his memory, oil and nationalism. Memo to President Bush and the GOP: Forget the Alamo — and back off on the Mexican oil thing.

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