

TWO FACES OF POST-NAFTA MEXICO

By Lawrence A. Herzog

QUERETARO, Mexico — Ancient peoples of Middle America believed they had found “the roof of the world” on the vast plateau joining the Rockies with the Sierra Madre mountains. Their prophets spoke of five great periods of time, each destined to end in disaster: in the beginning, the sky would fall upon the earth, followed by storms, fire, and floods. In the fifth and final era — the modern one — the world would disintegrate in a spectacular earthquake.

But this sense of doom that has long pervaded Mexican culture — and driven stereotypes north of the border — may be yielding to a different outcome: the rumbling of slow change called globalization.

Seen from the northern suburbs of one of Mexico’s booming high tech cities, along the “NAFTA corridor,” Queretaro offers a glimpse into one

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possible future south of the border. Here nearly a million people live in a city where the streets are clean and quiet, and freeways work well. You can watch Laker games on Direct TV, shop at Costco or Walmart, buy computer materials at Office Depot, rent videos at Blockbuster, and see first run Hollywood films in modern stadium style movie theaters.

The boom in the Queretaro region is driven by the influx of foreign high tech companies, most from the United States, along with the arrival of talented investors and professionals from Mexico City. A dazzling landscape of the new “global” Mexico abounds with elements of modernity and comfort. They include:

■ **Telephones:** The privatization of telecommunications in the 1990s yielded one of the best public telephone systems in North America. Telmex pay phones can be found almost everywhere — on neighborhood street corners, public squares, shopping avenues, malls, and parks. These well-designed phone modules are reliable, cheap and easy to use. Customers purchase 30, 50, 100 or 200 peso cards at the corner store or from ubiquitous street vendors in mobile carts.

■ **Bus travel:** The high quality inter-city buses, designed by either Volvo or Mercedes Benz, are spanking

new and loaded with the latest in technology, ultra-comfortable seats, sound-proofed interiors, video systems and TV monitors that show movies. The coaches are affordable, clean, safe, and, contrary to traditional Mexico, very punctual.

■ **Internet cafes.** Mexico has embraced the computer revolution in a very public way. Yes, millions of Mexicans own their own computers, and companies like Prodigy do a whopping business in online hookups. But there are scores of Internet cafes in every large Mexican city. At the Mexico City airport, there are also individual stations where, with a Telmex phone card, users can go online right at the gate as they await their flight.

■ **Malls.** Mexico has hundreds of shopping malls, many of which rival their counterparts in the United States, in terms of the quality of interior gardens, fountains, and food courts. Most malls have top-notch multi-cinemas attached, as well as locally popular restaurants.

■ **Gas stations.** Mexico’s nationalized petroleum company, Pemex, has built a national system of high quality filling stations. Immaculately dressed attendants in green overalls wave a friendly hello, as you enter. In addition to filling your gas tank, they routinely carry out a complete inspection from

fire air pressure, to engine fluids, fan belts, battery, and anything else.

For all its virtues, post-NAFTA, globalizing Mexico must continue to modernize its political system to avoid incidents like the following:

As the plush "Aero Plus" bus from Queretaro eased toward the international airport in Mexico City, an unmarked Federal police car swerved into it, lightly scraping its side. The police vehicle turned on its siren and pulled the bus over in the middle of a huge traffic jam. In full view of a busload of people anxiously needing to get to the airport, two plain-clothed federales dressed in faded blue jeans and work shirts, looking as if they came right out of the recent movie "Traffic," jumped out and began to harass the bus driver. The cop on the passenger side emerged with a revolver in his hand, which he then jammed, macho style, down his pants.

Here in front of thousands of freeway commuters, these men performed the rituals of old Mexico, a street theater of extortion and machismo. Even though they probably caused the minor collision, they were FEDERAL police and this poor, scared bus driver was going to pay. And even as average citizens came off the bus to protest this illegal stoppage, or to suggest that the cops ought to work this out with

the company, and not intimidate the poor driver, these tough street cops were not going to back down.

The bus stood precariously in the middle of heavy traffic on a major highway in Mexico City. Two more Federal Police of Mexico City arrived, looking like Mexican ninjas in black T-shirts and matching black jeans, seemingly reinforcing the power position of the original cops. But, then a Mexico City highway patrolman pulled up on a shiny, new oversized motorcycle. This cop, sporting a pressed brown and tan uniform with helmet, gloves and large black boots, strode purposefully into the fray. Now the situation became more complicated.

For more than one hour these various actors played out the timeworn cycle of head shaking, finger pointing, declaration of authority, threat, humor, and appeals to reason. In the end, the federal cops avoided losing face by insisting that someone on the bus accompany them to the airport where the situation would be "worked out."

This decision should have been made within the first five minutes.

Yet, this too is part of Mexico, part of the rumbling that can still be heard high up on the plateau that is the umbilical cord that continues to join our two cultures.