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Mexico: the U.S. press takes a siesta

The foreign press often scoops our best papers in covering our big neighbor's big problems

by ROGER MORRIS

In 1965, as the story goes, an Argentine leftist named Adolfo Gilly came to Mexico after making a name for himself as a revolutionary organizer and writer all over Latin America, from Chile to Cuba to Bolivia. Reportedly on a secret mission to support Guatemalan guerrillas, Gilly was arrested by the Mexican *federales* and sentenced to seven years in prison. While in prison, however, he wrote a Marxist interpretation of the 1910 Mexican Revolution which celebrated the event, especially its nationalist, anti-U.S. impulse, and which was widely read and acclaimed in Mexico. After his release, the authorities voided Gilly's conviction, absolved him of all charges, and eventually appointed him professor of political science at the National University in Mexico City. Thus was a onetime subversive transformed into a respected scholar.

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Foreign affairs — and an intimate liaison

There is at least one Mexican subject that has enjoyed substantially more U.S. coverage in the past two years: Mexico City's warmth toward the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and its peace overtures in El Salvador, both of which frequently put it at odds with the Reagan administration. Yet if the Central American crisis has sometimes made Mexican diplomacy a wire-service staple, it has done little to put the policy behind it in a historical context that would enable readers to see Mexico's actions as something other than the simple anti-American impulse visible in isolated episodes. In April and again in August 1983, *The Economist* analyzed Mexican policy — straddled between its own paternalism toward Central America and its domestic and historical desire to achieve greater independence from the U.S. — with a sophistication rarely seen in the American press.

Meanwhile, one aspect of Mexican foreign relations seems to remain forbidden ground for American journalism, despite recent events in Central America: Mexico City's intimate liaison with covert U.S. agencies. The largest U.S. mission in the world, literally swarming with attachés from

the Drug Enforcement Agency and (according to some sources) the FBI, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City has not been explored by reporters.

Among the most numerous of the Embassy's nondiplomatic denizens are the members of a large CIA station in Mexico City, long linked to the *federales*, with sometimes embarrassing but quickly concealed consequences. Beginning in January 1981, *The San Diego Union* ran a major investigative series on police corruption in Mexico. In the wake of the series, the local U.S. Attorney indicted, among other members of a far-flung car-smuggling ring, a high-ranking Tijuana police official named Naser Haro. Haro was also alleged to be a key colleague, if not an employee, of the CIA. It was a promising story, to say the least, but the full facts were never to be printed or brought to light in court. The U.S. Attorney, albeit a Republican, was summarily removed by the Reagan administration, the indictment was dropped, and the *Union's* stories on the subject abruptly ceased.

On September 27, 1984, *The New York Times* briefly lifted a similar veil when Philip Taubman reported that former CIA Latin America analyst John R. Horton had been pressured by Director William J. Casey to revise an intelligence estimate on Mexico. Casey wanted the report to portray conditions in Mexico as a threat to the country's stability and U.S. security, the *Times* revealed, and Horton's "data did not support such an alarmist conclusion." Intriguing and perhaps sensational, bristling with questions about Mexico as well as the forces that shape intelligence reports, it was another story destined for a dead end.

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