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SALT IN THE WOUND: THE COLORADO RIVER SALINITY CRISIS,  
THE COLD WAR, AND THE MEXICAN STATE, 1961-1974

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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and the Mexican State, 1961-1974

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At the beginning of the 1960s, cotton was Mexico's most valuable crop and its biggest export, and the Mexicali Valley in Baja California was Mexico's most productive cotton-growing region as well as a centerpiece of its agrarian reform. So when the waters of the Colorado River, whose water provided arid Mexicali its irrigation water, suddenly became highly salty in the autumn of 1961 as a result of agricultural drainage upstream in Arizona, locals and government officials alike reacted with alarm, sparking what became a twelve year long diplomatic dispute between Mexico and the United States and a political crisis within Mexico itself.

The story of the Colorado River salinity crisis provides new insights into one of the most persistent questions of Mexican history: how the country's single-party regime evolved and endured for so long, and how its features shaped contemporary Mexico. While scholars have detailed how corruption, co-optation, and culture supported the regime, few have examined how environmental change shaped and reflected the state's rule, even though its claim to revolutionary credibility rested in large part on its promise to nationalize water and subsoil rights and to remake agrarian society.

Combining environmental and political history, this dissertation argues that the changing ecology of the Lower Colorado River undergirded the evolution of Mexico's authoritarian political system during the Cold War of the 1960s and early 1970s. The problem of salinity gave teeth to a nationwide leftist challenge to the ruling party's grip on power, inspired in part by the Cuban Revolution, and which took up salinity as a rallying cause. With the resolution of the problem mired in ecological complexity and diplomatic impasse, the Mexican government sought a solution through foreign policy. Tacking leftwards and embracing relations with revolutionary Cuba as a sop to domestic leftists, Mexican officials warned their U.S. counterparts that the salinity problem was catalyzing Communist agitation within Mexico. To increase the pressure, the government began encouraging and facilitating anti-U.S. protests in Mexicali, while ruthlessly repressing those that targeted the regime itself. The strategy won concessions from the United States in 1965 and 1973 agreements, and helped to defuse the leftist challenge by the mid 1960s.

At the same time, the dissertation argues that the nature and exigencies of Mexican authoritarianism were the driving force in the ecological transformation of the Colorado River Delta from the late 1960s onwards. The political utility of the salinity issue to induce loyalty to the ruling party at a time of increasing opposition caused the regime to double down on its pursuit of irrigated cotton agriculture in Mexicali, against the evidence from its own scientists of cotton's unsustainability, not just from salinity but from other ecological and hydrological problems. Concessions from the United States helped to fund a massive irrigation infrastructure project in the 1970s, designed to restore both the prosperity of cotton and political stability, which eventually achieved neither but inadvertently nudged forward a trend towards bi-national cooperation and ecological restoration along the river.

Based on a wide range of archival sources, the dissertation contributes to our understanding of Cold War Mexico's domestic politics and foreign policy, and shows how techno-ecological change and political authoritarianism both strengthened and undermined each other, a finding with broad implications beyond Mexico.

**Dedication:**

Dedicated to my parents,  
Nancy Harris and Tony Reid

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## Introduction



*Technicians from the Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado discover the Wellton-Mohawk drainage canal, October 1961. Photo courtesy of El Archivo Histórico del Agua, Mexico City.*

The Mexicali Valley welcomed the coming of autumn in 1961 with relief, as it did every year. The terrifying heat of the Sonoran Desert's summer months, when the temperature pushes above 120 F, began to wane to September's merely brutal daily average of 87 F. The frenzied season of the cotton harvest came to a close, and the valley breathed a collective sigh of relief. The seasonal day laborers workers who picked the cotton in the heat of the desert sun – labor too hard for me to imagine – began to look for other jobs or, not finding those, other places to look, often across the U.S.-Mexico border which runs right through town. Cotton farmers trucked their last bales of harvested cotton to the gins, tallied

their profits and repaid their agricultural loans – and, in many cases, refinanced new ones for the next season. Executives at the cotton and cottonseed processing conglomerates charted their projections for the season's exports. For farmer and financier, *bracero* and businessman, it was a time to reset, take stock, and prepare for the toil of the next agricultural cycle.

All seemed to be agri-business as usual in Mexicali as October got underway in 1961. The summer's cotton harvest had been a good one, although not quite as bountiful as those of the early 50s, Mexicali's gold rush days. The obstacles to harvesting a profit from the Valley's arid soils had presented themselves and, mostly, been overcome: a fluctuating market price for exported cotton, unforgiving terms for agricultural credit, the delicate alchemy of cultivating robust plants from the sand and clay sedimentary soils of the valley, especially getting enough water to irrigate them – particularly vital in a region where the average annual rainfall is less than three inches and is mostly delivered all at once, in short, torrential, downpours. Following the usual September routine, cotton farmers plowed their fields and planted the winter wheat and alfalfa crops. Although far behind to cotton in terms of economic importance, the winter crops provided a financial boost to help carry farmers through the winter to the next cotton harvest.

But in that fateful October of 1961, the usual end-of-season pattern did not unfold. The freshly planted alfalfa crop failed across large parts of the valley. Entire fields of plants withered and died, their leaves turning brown under the scorching desert sun. As perplexed farmers gazed upon dead fields, engineers in the Valley's many cotton and cottonseed processing factories found an unusual buildup of mineral scale in hot-water plumbing and machinery, causing a number of equipment breakdowns. *Mexicalense* city dwellers noticed a

salty and unpleasant taste in their municipal water supply, and a number of people complained of stomach ailments and nausea. A technician from the *Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado* (Colorado River Irrigation District, the local irrigation and agriculture authority overseen by the *Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos*, or Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, SRH) took water samples from the Valley's source of irrigation water, the Colorado River, and found the culprit: salt. The river's salinity had soared from its usual average of around 750 parts per million (ppm) to over 2500 ppm, a level that made it deadly for irrigation and unusable for industrial machinery as well as unpleasant to taste.<sup>1</sup> Farmers, cotton businessmen, and technicians from the Distrito de Riego puzzled over the water's leap in salt content. What had caused it? Where was the salt in the water coming from? How could it be stopped?

Before long, the source was located: Arizona. Word reached Mexicali that in the Wellton-Mohawk Valley, an agricultural district east of Yuma, dozens of wells were pumping extremely saline groundwater into the Gila River, the last main tributary of the Colorado. Distrito de Riego technicians drove across the border to investigate. They found a newly constructed canal pouring water into the Gila close to its confluence with the Colorado, just upstream of the border with Mexico. Tests of the canal's water revealed its salinity at close to 7,000 ppm, an extremely high level (by comparison, the salinity of seawater is around 35,000 ppm). Further investigation showed the canal was fed by water from a network of 67 deep wells across the Wellton-Mohawk Valley. As the technicians would discover, the wells had been dug to improve agriculture in the Valley by draining

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<sup>1</sup> Dirección General de Límites y Aguas to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 11 December 1961. Archivo Genaro Estrada de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (henceforth SRE), Fondo Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (Henceforth CILA), File C-132-4, Folio 37.

saline groundwater from the soil. The problem was that the brackish water they pumped from deep underground was poured into the Gila River at its confluence with the Colorado – just north of the border with Mexico. The saline groundwater mixed with Mexicali’s irrigation water, producing the alarming effects first noticed that October.

When the news of the Wellton-Mohawk pumps reached Mexicali, the valley exploded in protest. Week after week, thousands of Mexicalenses from all walks of life marched down the city’s main street and massed in the plaza between the *Palacio de Gobierno* and the U.S. Consulate, demanding that the flow of saline water be stopped. From leftist students to conservative businessmen, from day-laboring fieldworkers to the executives of international cotton firms, all depended on the Colorado’s water for their livelihood and all lent their voice to the protests. The Mexican government leapt into action as well. The Mexican section of the International Boundaries and Waters Commission (*la Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas* in Spanish, IBWC-CILA), a bi-national entity that administers the use of the rivers the two countries share, sent a deluge of memos to its U.S. counterpart.<sup>2</sup> The *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (Secretariat of Foreign Relations, SRE) took up the cause and in early November, only a few weeks after the salt problem had been discovered, Mexico’s ambassador to the United States delivered a formal diplomatic protest demanding the flow of saline water be stopped.

So began what historians have called the Colorado River Salinity Crisis, what actors at the time simply called the salinity problem, or *caso salino* in Mexico. To the anger of Mexicalenses, it took twelve years before the problem was definitively resolved. A diplomatic disagreement over the legal dimensions of the issue quickly stalled into deadlock.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will use “CILA” to refer to the Mexican section of the commission, “IBWC” to refer to the U.S. section, and “IBWC-CILA” when referring to the commission as a whole.

Mexicans demanded an end to the salt; the United States, for various reasons, refused. Both sides claimed that international law, water-use principles, and common-sense notions of fairness supported their respective positions. Both were right, at least partially. In 1961 the existing agreements on the use of the Colorado's waters were inadequate for the rapid development the river underwent in the latter half of the twentieth century. The 1944 Waters Treaty, which divided the river's waters between both nations, was silent on water quality, and in certain respects, the salinity problem landed in uncharted legal and ecological territory. Over time, however, Mexico's claims carried greater weight and the dispute was resolved in its favor. A temporary agreement was reached in 1965 to keep the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk out of Mexicali's irrigation water; it was expanded and made permanent in a 1973 agreement that conceded Mexico generous terms and loans. The problem was solved, and both nations moved on.

Or so the official record would have it. In government publications on the topic, the salinity problem is remembered one-dimensionally, as a technical-juridical disagreement between two nations in which justice and diplomacy prevailed.<sup>3</sup> This cut-and-dried view of the salinity problem has helped to exclude it from its rightful place at the center of the historiography of 1960s Mexico.<sup>4</sup> It belies the true complexity and historical importance of the salinity crisis. Far from just another disagreement between neighbors, the flow of salty water from Wellton-Mohawk in October 1961 sparked a bi-national conflict that would last

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<sup>3</sup> Such is the version, seasoned with a sense of righteous indignation, given in the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations' account of the salinity crisis, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *La salinidad del Río Colorado: una diferencia internacional*. (Tlatelolco, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1975). The International Boundaries and Waters Commission publishes the texts of bi-national agreements concerning the river and avoids editorial commentary. <<http://www.ibwc.state.gov/>>. The Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District follows a similar line but notes that the treaty governing the river in 1961 made no provision for water quality (about which more details follow). <<http://www.wmidd.org/challenges.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> The notable exception is Evan R Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

for twelve years, roil the politics of Mexicali and Baja California, shake the foundations of Mexico's single-party state, re-shape hemispheric relations at the height of the Cold War, and mark a turning point in the ecological transformation of the Lower Colorado River.

For the salinity was never just one problem, but a tangled set of issues in different places and at different scales, each affecting the other. At the local level in the Mexicali Valley, the rise in salinity threatened the vitality of a prosperous agro-economy based in export-oriented cotton agriculture. When the salinity problem began, Mexicali was Mexico's biggest producer of cotton, and cotton was Mexico's biggest export. The salt from Wellton-Mohawk threatened cotton at a basic level, by slowing the process of osmosis by which plants drew water through their roots, and poisoning soils with a layer of mineral accumulation. Yet these effects were felt unequally across lines of class delineated by access to water, financial resources, and agrarian technology. The menace of salinity thus in turn exacerbated existing social and political tensions within Mexicali that had arisen in the long process of *Mexicanización* – the takeover of U.S.-owned lands by the post-Revolutionary Mexican state; the uneven Cardenista agrarian reform that starting in the 1930s had turned some land over to communally-held *ejidos* and put some in private hands; the continued importance of cross-border movements of people, commerce, and capital. Specifically, the salinity problem added fuel to a radical agrarian group that challenged the local government to follow through on its Revolutionary promises of total agrarian reform and opposed the influence of local landowners and cotton industrialists. The political force of agrarian organization in Mexicali in turn re-ordered the technocratic efforts to reform and rehabilitate the agro-ecological machinery of water distribution underpinning the region's prosperity.

The salinity had effects at the national level. The radical agrarian group from Mexicali joined a national opposition movement that emerged simultaneously with the problem of salinity and was embodied by the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Movement, MLN). This national movement challenged the political dominance of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), Mexico's de-facto ruling party since 1929, by drawing inspiration from the recent Cuban Revolution. By comparing Cuba's rapid reforms and fierce ideological commitment to the many failed promises of Mexico's own Constitution, the MLN exposed the ruling party's lack of Revolutionary credibility and challenged its very ruling legitimacy. The swiftness of the MLN's rise, its influential backers, and its wide appeal made it an unprecedented threat to the regime's strength. The salinity issue contributed in two ways. First, the Mexicalense farmers who rallied against the salinity proved one of the most dynamic and cohesive of the many leftist factions forming the MLN and gave the national group organizational strength. Second, the salinity provided a rallying cause to disaffected Mexicans far from the Mexicali Valley, because it so potently symbolized the PRI's shortcomings and tropes of Mexican nationalism: the abandonment of the countryside and *campesinos* (literally "people of the field," often translated as "peasants"; more accurate though cumbersome is "rural-dwellers"), weakness towards the United States, the surrender of national sovereignty. The salt from Wellton-Mohawk thus helped to fuel a national level challenge to Mexico's post-Revolutionary political regime.

This spilled over into the international aspects of the salinity problem. The most urgent of these was a long-lasting diplomatic impasse between Mexico and the United States over the interpretation of the 1944 treaty that divided the waters of the Colorado River.

Indeed, from 1961 until 1973, no other single issue dominated relations between the two countries to the same degree. As William G. Bowdler, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, put it in 1974, “Whenever an issue arose in our relations with Mexico, whenever opportunities appeared for cooperation between the two Governments, when our parliamentarians met in joint meetings, as they do every year, the salinity problem invariably confronted our spokesmen.”<sup>5</sup> The diplomatic dispute hinged on the fundamental question of whether the United States had a duty to provide Mexico water of a certain quality, and the related issue of how to define the nature of the Colorado River basin and the water being pumped from Wellton-Mohawk.

The diplomatic dispute over salinity, moreover, became embroiled in the triangular Cold War relationship between Cuba, Mexico, and the United States. As Renata Keller has argued, in an effort to burnish its Revolutionary credibility and to outflank the challenge from domestic leftists in the MLN, the PRI embraced Castro and cultivated close relations with Revolutionary Cuba, in defiance of U.S. pressure.<sup>6</sup> The PRI likewise positioned the salinity issue within this dynamic, by pointing to Mexicalenses’ demonstrations as Communist subversion, and threatening the United States that continued inaction on the salinity problem would push the PRI further to the left, away from the United States and closer to Cuba. To increase the pressure, the PRI actively incited and encouraged protests in Mexicali, even helping to organize them, when they targeted the United States. At the same

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<sup>5</sup> “Statements of J.F. Friedkin and Ambassador William G. Bowdler before the Subcommittee on Water and Power Resources, regarding the implementation of the Salinity Agreement with Mexico,” 4 March 1974. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 373-393.

<sup>6</sup> Her analysis, however, ignores the importance of the salinity issue both to pro-Cuba activists within Mexico and in U.S.-Mexican relations more broadly. Renata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, 2015; Renata Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico’s Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969,” *Latin American Research Review* 47, no. 2 (2012): 100–119.



time, it ruthlessly repressed those protests that challenged the Mexican government itself. Thus the local, national and international levels of the salinity problem were not separate at all, but interwoven and mutually re-shaping strands of the same knot of issues.

The unrecognized history of the salinity problem fills an important gap in the historiography of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico and the environment. There is a large body of literature on the PRI, a *sui generis* authoritarian regime whose contradictions continue to puzzle and fascinate scholars: a “perfect dictatorship,” in Mario Vargas Llosa’s words, of regular presidential succession and the facade of democracy, authoritarianism with institutionalized grassroots participation, presiding over seven straight decades of relative stability and four (1940-1982) of 6% average economic growth, a system that continues to have outsize effects on contemporary Mexican life.<sup>7</sup> The literature has gone through several revisions, from early, sympathetic works that depicted the PRI as the embodiment of the people’s will forged in Revolution, to a revision following the state violence of the 1960s and 1970s that labeled the PRI a totalitarian state from its very founding, to a cultural turn in the 1990s that emphasized PRI state formation as a series of everyday cultural interactions and discourses that shaped power as much from below as from the top down, to a renewed focus in recent years on state violence and repression. Scholars have elaborated a sophisticated understanding of how clientelism and capitalism,<sup>8</sup> culture,<sup>9</sup> and violence<sup>10</sup> underpinned PRI

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<sup>7</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, “Mexico: The Perfect Dictatorship,” *New Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (1991); see also Jorge G Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power: How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen* (New York: New Press, 2000), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Stephen H Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); Stephen H Haber, *Mexico Since 1980* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); Roger D. Hansen, *The Politics of Mexican Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Mark Wasserman, *Pesos and Politics: Business, Elites, Foreigners, and Government in Mexico, 1854-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

rule.<sup>11</sup> Yet much less has been written about the relationship between the development of the post-Revolutionary state and the transformation of the Mexican landscape and ecology.

This is a curious oversight, given how important questions of agrarian reform, subsoil rights and water have been to the history of Mexico. Many works have tackled these questions, but few have employed a fully environmental perspective. For example, Mexico has an unusually well developed scholarly literature on water, much of it pioneered by Luis Aboites Aguilar.<sup>12</sup> Aboites posited the development of water resources as a fundamental facet of state building, tracing the federal implementation of grand irrigation schemes from the 1920s as a key aspect of the Revolutionary state's efforts to impose its influence on the Mexican countryside and to forge modern citizens, and the "decadence" of those schemes in the latter half of the century as paralleling the decline of the PRI regime. Indeed, the Mexican regime was an unusually watery one. President Plutarco Elías Calles established the

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<sup>9</sup> For overviews, see G. M Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); G. M Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); G. M Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); for individual case studies, see, inter alia, Celeste González de Bustamante, *"Muy Buenas Noches": Mexico, Television, and the Cold War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: a Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Mary K Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Robert F Alegre, *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Enrique Condés Lara, *Represión y rebelión en México (1959-1985)* (México, D.F.: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2007); Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Jaime M Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Others have questioned the scholarship's focus on the PRI rule itself. Jeffrey W Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Luis Aboites, *La irrigación revolucionaria: historia del sistema nacional de riego del Río Conchos, Chihuahua, 1927-1938* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Educación Pública : CIESAS, 1988); Luis Aboites, *El agua de la nación: una historia política de México, (1888-1946)* (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1998); Luis Aboites, *La decadencia del agua de la nación: estudio sobre desigualdad social y cambio político en México (segunda mitad del siglo XX)* (México, D.F.: Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2009).

*Comisión Nacional de Irrigación* (National Irrigation Commission, CNI) in 1926 as part of the ministry of agriculture, even before the PRI's first incarnation as the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*. President Miguel Alemán transformed the CNI into the stand-alone *Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos* (Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, SRH) in 1952, the only such ministry in the western hemisphere, and for the next decade it consumed between 8-11% of the Mexican government's total expenditures.<sup>13</sup> Yet while Aboites's work has been concerned with the "social uses" of water, his and others' works have treated water one-dimensionally, as the terrain of politics and human action, with little attention to how water itself plays a political role, and how ecological conditions constrain and shape people's choices and the possibilities of politics.<sup>14</sup>

Environmental history – the focus on how people have thought about, shaped, and been shaped by the natural world – has developed gradually in Mexico. The discipline has been slow to surpass its origins in U.S. environmentalist movements and to focus, in the words of the environmental historian J.R. McNeill, on topics that "other historians care about."<sup>15</sup> That has begun to change for Mexico in recent years, with scholars advancing a number of works that demonstrate how environmental consciousness and transformation

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<sup>13</sup> Mikael Wolfe, "Water and Revolution: The Politics, Ecology and Technology of Agrarian Reform in 'La Laguna,' Mexico" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009), 13.

<sup>14</sup> See also Vivienne Bennett, *The Politics of Water: Urban Protest, Gender, and Power in Monterrey, Mexico* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); for exceptions, see Alejandro Tortolero, *El agua y su historia: México y sus desafíos hacia el siglo XXI* (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2000); Alejandro Tortolero, "Water and Revolution in Morelos, 1850-1915," in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R Boyer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012); for the colonial period, see Vera S Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*, 2014; Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *To Defend Our Water with the Blood of Our Veins: The Struggle for Resources in Colonial Puebla* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> J. R. McNeill, "Future Research Needs in Environmental History: Region, Eras, Themes," in *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter, and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, 2011); see also J. R. McNeill, "Drunks, Lampposts, and Environmental History," *Environmental History* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 64–66.

shaped the development of the post-Revolutionary regime.<sup>16</sup> Yet these have mostly focused on the period before 1940 and have postulated the long-critiqued view that the post-Revolutionary regime embodied the will of the people.<sup>17</sup> Less attention has been paid to the so-called Mexican Miracle of continued economic growth (1940-1960) and to the post-1960 period, which many scholars consider the start of the PRI's decline (a dubious claim, given the party stayed in power until 2000).

Other scholars, propelled by the convergence of post-colonial studies, Cold War history, and environmental history, have produced a body of scholarship that identifies the development of the modern state in the cultivation of normative forms of knowledge about technology, people, and the environment, and the mutual transformation of all three.<sup>18</sup> Others have shown how control over natural resources, landscape, and environmental change have shaped political power, while still others have emphasized the overlapping, enmeshing, and

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<sup>16</sup> Lane Simonian, *Defending the Land of the Jaguar: a History of Conservation in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Joel Simon, *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997); Ward, *Border Oasis*; Myrna I Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: a Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008); Emily Wakild, "Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation, 1935--1945," *Environmental History* 14 (2009): 453--75; Emily Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910-1940* (Tucson: University of Ariz, 2011); Christopher R Boyer, *A Land Between Waters Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10628014>; Christopher R Boyer, *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> In particular, Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*; Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks*.

<sup>18</sup> Many have followed James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); for critiques of Scott, see Fernando Coronil, "Smelling Like a Market," *The American Historical Review*, 2001; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); see also Michael E Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Arun Agrawal, *Environmentalism: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

mutually-transforming influences of ecology, technology, and humans.<sup>19</sup> Yet much of this scholarship has focused on U.S. influence or post-colonial relations, and has been slow to recognize the implications, in the Latin American context, of what Tanya Harmer called the “Inter-American Cold War,” the multi-dimensional nature of foreign relations and the important role of unaligned nations in shaping the global conflict.<sup>20</sup> The Colorado River has been the focus of many environmental historians, but they have almost all relegated Mexico to a secondary, subordinate place on the river, and have not interrogated the ways that Mexicans have reshaped the river’s landscapes for reasons having little to do with the United States.<sup>21</sup> Thus while scholars recognize that the one-time “River of Empire” has been “democratized,” the empire in question is still assumed to be the United States. The story of the Colorado as the River of Mexican Authoritarianism has not been fully told.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London; New York: Verso, 2007); Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Sara B Pritchard, *Confluence: The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhône* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); for opposing perspectives, see Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Stephen G Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Evan R Ward’s outstanding *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003) goes furthest in correcting this bias. Still, Ward highlights U.S. aggression in a relationship of “asymmetric interdependence” (20), emphasizes the U.S. (specifically Arizona) origins of bi-national conflict over the river, and argues that its solution reflected U.S. states’ competition for water more than Mexican initiatives. Other recent works with a fuller Mexican perspective include Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: a Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), which touches on the Colorado but focuses on the Rio Grande; and Summitt, *Contested Waters*; classic works include Norris Hundley Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Philip L Fradkin, *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Summitt, *Contested Waters*, xii; referencing Worster, *Rivers of Empire*.

My dissertation fills the gap between studies of grassroots activism and state repression in Mexico, the global Cold War, and environmental change. It unites three strands of scholarship on modern Mexico that have not yet been connected within the same frame of analysis, each represented by a recent book. Tanalís Padilla's *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priista* offered a fine-grained narrative of the rising and falling fortunes of a single political group and its leader, Rubén Jaramillo, demonstrating how the regime's stalling of reform through electoral means led to radicalization, and finally state violence, which became a staple of state power from 1940.<sup>23</sup> Yet Padilla's study of state violence pays little attention to the broader context of Cold War violence, insurgency and repression in Latin America. Renata Keller's recent *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* superbly profiles the foreign policy dimensions of domestic Mexican politics, convincingly arguing that the Mexican government's ambivalent embrace of Revolutionary Cuba served to diffuse the critiques of domestic leftists who challenged the regime's Revolutionary credibility. Yet her study takes the words of both secret police agents and political activists at face value: she does not interrogate the political, economic, or, indeed, ecological contexts of the political activists she describes, flattening their motivations as a bland, abstract "leftism." Finally, Mikael D. Wolfe's recent PhD thesis (and forthcoming book) *Water and Revolution: The Politics, Ecology and Technology of Agrarian Reform in 'La Laguna,' Mexico* provides an in-depth environmental perspective on water, ecology, technology, and political power in the important cotton growing region along the Nazas River, arguing that agrarian reform fell victim to the contradictions between its promise of political liberation and its ecological

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<sup>23</sup> Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata*.

limits.<sup>24</sup> Yet the Nazas River, unlike the Colorado, is not an international stream, making Wolfe's environmental history of the Laguna a nationally-bounded narrative.

My dissertation asks how the interplay of ecological change, foreign relations, and political activism shaped and reflected PRI rule during the 1960s and 1970s in the example of the Colorado River salinity crisis. I argue that ecological change in the Colorado River delta, brought on by U.S. developments upstream and by the process of *Mexicanización* in the Mexicali Valley, undergirded the early 1960s challenge to the PRI and its subsequent foreign relations with Cuba and the United States. The PRI's coercive, repressive response to political mobilization within Mexico, and its foreign policy towards Cuba and the United States, in turn remade the landscape of the Colorado River, albeit in unexpected ways; it hastened the technological transformation of the Mexicali Valley and presaged an era of bi-national cooperation on the river. In short, the river remade PRI politics – locally, nationally, and internationally – and politics, in turn, remade the river. Underlying this process, I argue, was the influence of Mexicali politics and political actors, whose motivation and choices derived from the social and ecological context of the Mexicali Valley. The PRI regime, as will be seen, “won” the dispute over salinity. It gained the concessions it desired from the U.S. government and defused opposition to its rule – or co-opted it, to use a term frequently applied to the PRI.<sup>25</sup> Yet in doing so, the PRI itself was co-opted: by Mexicalenses who won a place in politics (albeit an ambivalent one), by U.S. water users, who also benefitted from the resolution of the problem, and even by the river itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Wolfe, “Water and Revolution.”

<sup>25</sup> For co-optation and the salinity crisis, see Ward, *Border Oasis*, 86; on co-optation under PRI Mexico, see Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T Smith, *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938-1968*, 2014, 4.

*Salt in the Wound* holds important implications for a world of accelerating climate change, population growth, and increasingly frequent scarcity of water. It shows that in bi-national disputes over water, the race is not always to the swift: weaker nations can leverage concerns over national security, economic interests, and intellectual currents to their advantage. By the same token, it complicates the question of international environmental justice, by demonstrating how a movement ostensibly to right an ecological wrong ended up strengthening authoritarian government and suppressing democracy while accelerating unsustainable environmental practices.<sup>26</sup> Finally, it offers a cautious vote for optimism for the future of the Colorado River, that in spite of the myriad conflicts for its water, voices for international cooperation towards sustainability and restoration have continued to gain strength.

Chapter One relates the political and ecological history of the Mexicali Valley up to 1961, the year the salinity crisis began. Chapter Two details the outburst of anger in Mexicali to the rise in salinity, and the diplomatic response they provoked, which quickly deadlocked over juridical questions. The impasse pushed the salinity issue into the triangular Cold War relations between Mexico, Cuba and the United States. Chapter Three details how the salinity problem empowered a wave of political opposition to the PRI in Mexicali and Mexico more broadly, which the PRI began to use to pressure the United States, at first to no avail. Chapter Four relates how the Mexican government, frustrated by the diplomatic impasse, began to facilitate and publicize protests in Mexicali, pointing to them as evidence of Communist subversion, to pressure the United States government, this time successfully, achieving an

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<sup>26</sup> On environmental justice and the salinity issue, see Stephen Mumme and Peter Leigh Taylor, "The Ocotillo Water War and the U.S.-Mexico 'Salinity Crisis': An Examination of Transitivity and Scale in Environmental Justice," *Journal of the Southwest Journal of the Southwest* 56, no. 1 (2014): 1–28; see also Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.



agreement in 1965 to alleviate the salinity problem. The promise of the agreement permitted the PRI to decisively crack down on protesters who had used the salinity problem to challenge the government.

Chapter Five details the ambivalent results of the 1965 agreement in Mexicali, where the decline of irrigation infrastructure, the invasion of the pink bollworm, and the drop in global cotton prices conspired to devastate the cotton economy despite efforts to improve infrastructure, producing fresh political opposition to the government. The PRI's response opened the door for the once-repressed opposition group to return to political influence, this time under the ruling party's umbrella. Chapter 6 relates the revival of the international dispute over salinity in the early 1970s, which President Luis Echeverría pursued despite the advice of Mexican scientists, for political purposes: to restore the PRI's influence in Baja California and across the country. His strategy institutionalized the return to the PRI fold of the opposition groups that had originally mobilized against the government over the salinity problem in 1961. The Conclusion turns to the long-term effects of the dispute over salinity, suggesting that the PRI's triumph may have been a Pyrrhic victory.

The dissertation draws from archival sources in Mexico and the United States. Among them were the archives of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (Federal Directorate of Security, DFS), Mexico's secret police and half, along with the *Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales* (General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations, DGIPS) of Mexico's domestic intelligence agencies. The opening of the archives of these agencies in 2002 proved a major boon to historians – a short-lived one, perhaps, because in January 2015 access to the DFS documents was again closed to

researchers under a draconian reading of Mexico's Archives Law.<sup>27</sup> The archives contain thousands of documents and reports on opposition groups, activists, politicians, and everyday people over decades and, until their reclassification, were one of the best windows into 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico that we had. They are not, of course, without their problems.

These stem partly from the nature of the agency itself. In the John LeCarré novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, the character Bill Haydon believes "that secret services were the only real measure of a nation's political health, the only real expression of its subconscious." If true, this does not flatter Mexico. The DFS, created in 1947, was a notorious force, and a key tool of repression, coercion, and authoritarianism under the PRI.<sup>28</sup> Agents were chosen directly by the President for their political loyalty, not their judgment, experience, or acumen. Their *charola*, or badge, which granted them practically unlimited policing powers and legal immunity, became infamous. This impunity before the law made the force ever more corrupt, until its disbanding in 1985 after a scandal implicating higher-ups in drug trafficking (it was reshuffled into today's *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional*, Center for Investigation and National Security, CISEN).

The force executed its day-to-day activities with the same lack of integrity. Agents relied on a wide network of informants, and submitted near-daily reports to their superiors. Compiled from these, a weekly intelligence briefing would be presented to the President. While our knowledge of the inner workings of the force is still limited, it does seem that the

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<sup>27</sup> Many scholars familiar with the archive suspect political motives were behind the closing. For a variety of viewpoints, see "Archives and Access: the DFS Controversy," <<http://hahr-online.com/open-forum-on-archives-and-access-the-dfs-controversy/>>.

<sup>28</sup> Sergio Aguayo Quezada was the first researcher granted access to the archives, in 1999, *La Charola: Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México* (Sergio Aguayo, 2011); see also Aaron W Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1954* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); see also Tanalís Padilla and Louise E. Walker, "Special Issue: Spy Reports: Content, Methodology, and Historiography in Mexico's Secret Police Archive," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19, no. 1 (2013) for a collection of articles on the possibilities and pitfalls of using the archives and a series of transcribed documents.

agency spent more time on intelligence gathering than on intelligence analysis. Moreover, agents frequently exaggerated or lied outright about the activities of the people they spied on, to heighten their importance and value to superiors. Besides the lies, the reports are riddled with inaccuracies, typos, and errors. Relying on the archives is therefore tricky, as is true for any historical source. The amount of information they contain is tantalizing, but reading them too closely risks repeating or amplifying the errors and paranoia of the agents themselves.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, they provide an unparalleled look into the day-to-day activities of protesters and opposition groups in Mexicali and beyond, and form a central plank of the dissertation's source base.

Another valuable archival source was the collection of documents from the Mexican section of the *Comisión Internacional de Aguas y Límites* (International Boundaries and Waters Commission, IBWC-CILA), a bi-national technocratic entity that administered the shared waters of the Tijuana, Colorado, and Grande/Bravo rivers. These papers, housed in the archives of the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (SRE) in Mexico City, combine technical information, bi-national memoranda and communications, and communications between the CILA, the SRE, and the office of the Mexican president. They provided an in-depth portrayal of how Mexican authorities understood and attacked the salinity problem in its scientific, legal, and diplomatic dimensions.

Additional technical information about water resources came from the *Archivo Histórico del Agua* (Historic Archive of Water, AHA) in Mexico City, which houses the papers of the former *Comisión Nacional de Irrigación* (National Irrigation Commission, CNI) and *Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos* (Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, SRH).

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Laura Stoler offers a useful guide to approaching similar archives in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Finally, the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Libraries, in Boston and Austin, and the National Security Archive in Washington D.C. filled in the U.S. diplomatic perspective.

**Foreword**  
**A Technical Primer on Salinity**

To understand why salinity became a crisis, and why the crisis took so long to solve, it is necessary to first understand some basics on the technical aspects of irrigation and drainage and how salinity affects them. All bodies of fresh water naturally contain some amount of minerals dissolved in them. This amount is expressed by hydrologists as Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) and is measured in parts per million (ppm), milligrams per Liter (mg/L), through the water's conductivity, or as overall tonnage. This mineral content is usually described as salinity, although salt (sodium chloride, NaCl) is only one of the minerals, albeit the most detrimental to plants. The salinity of water is a function of two factors: the amount of minerals, and the volume of water they are dissolved in. Thus salinity can be increased or decreased by adding or removing salt content, raising or lowering the water volume, or both.

Much of the salinity in a given body of water occurs naturally. A little more than half the salt content of the Colorado River, for example, comes from natural sources.<sup>1</sup> Rain falls on lands adjacent to the river. It percolates through the soil and passes through underground mineral deposits, dissolving them and carrying the mineral content into the river. Hot springs, geysers, and other forms of volcanic activity are also major sources of salt loading, particularly in the Colorado River.

The chief human-caused source of salinity comes from agriculture, especially the reclamation of arid lands for farming via irrigation. Water is poured onto fields to irrigate

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor O. Miller, Gary D. Weatherford, and John E. Thorson, *The Salty Colorado* (The Conservative Foundation - Washington, DC, and John Muir Institute - Napa, CA, 1986).

them, and as it percolates into the soil and back to the river, it carries dissolved mineral and salt content with it. This problem is particularly acute in arid regions, which the Colorado River runs through along much of its 1,450 mile length. Unlike temperate regions, where regular rainfall washes the soil of its minerals, carrying it into rivers or deep into the soil, arid soils contain a high amount of minerals. When they are abruptly converted to agriculture via irrigation, they send a huge amount of salt back into the river with their drainage.

Salt is deadly for plants because it stops them from absorbing water through osmosis. If your high school chemistry is rusty, osmosis is the movement of a solvent across a semi-permeable membrane into a region of higher solute concentration. In other words, water moves to maintain a similar concentration of solutes on both sides of a semi-permeable membrane (such as most cell walls). Under optimal conditions, the water outside a plant's roots has lower concentration of salts and minerals than the water inside the roots' cells. Water therefore passes through the cell walls into the plant, lowering the concentration of minerals there until a steady-state equilibrium is reached, in which water entering the plant equals the water leaving it.

When plants are irrigated with saline water, osmosis is slowed or even stopped. The concentration of dissolved minerals outside and inside the roots is roughly similar; not enough water enters the plant cells to maintain its cellular integrity, and the plant wilts, shrivels, and eventually dies. Salinity, therefore, is harmful to plants. But things get more complicated. The volume of irrigation water, for example, is extremely important. When water is applied to soil for irrigation, some of it is absorbed by the plants and leaves its mineral content in the soil. Some of the water that is not absorbed by the plants rises up to the surface through the capillary effect, where it is evaporated by the sun (particularly in the hot,

dry climate of the desert) leaving its mineral content behind as well. If the volume of irrigation water is too low, these minerals can build up in the soil, salinizing it and turning it deadly for agriculture. Farmers must therefore apply a surplus of irrigation water to help wash these accumulated minerals down through the soil past the reach of the plants' roots.

The acceptable level of salinity therefore depends on the volume of irrigation water. If a higher volume of water is being applied, the water can have higher salinity without detrimental effects on the plants or the soil. If a lower volume of irrigation water is applied, it must have lower salinity, or plants will suffer damage and salts will begin to accumulate in the soil. The volume of water in turn depends on the soil's capacity for drainage. As anyone who has killed a houseplant by overwatering knows, too much water can be just as deadly to plants as not enough water. The amount of water applied for irrigation therefore must not exceed the soil's capacity to drain it. Clay soils hold water and drain very slowly; sandy soils drain more quickly. In a field with clay soils, the volume of irrigation water must be the minimum that will still permit excess minerals to be washed away, and must therefore have lower salinity. In a sandy field with good drainage, a large excess of irrigation water can safely be applied to wash excess minerals out of the root zone. The irrigation water therefore can safely have higher salinity. The ultimate determinant of acceptable salinity, of course, is the plant – some naturally have higher tolerance for salty water.

Drainage can be increased with ditches, wells, and tile drains (also known as tube drains). The simplest, cheapest, but least effective method is through open-air ditches. In this method, farmers border their fields with ditches a few feet deep. Groundwater moves through the soil towards the ditch, where it emerges and flows away. Yet the drainage capacity of ditches is quite low, and decreases with distance away from the ditch. Ditches' effectiveness

is also reduced by the growth of plant life within them, through silting, and by the percolation of water back into the soil.

Wells are more effective. By pumping steadily from a deep well, a farmer can create what hydrologists call a cone of extraction: a conical gradient in the water table in a circle around the well with its lowest point at the point of extraction. Lowering the water table in this area allows water applied on the surface to drain down past the root zone more quickly. Wells, however, are more expensive to construct and operate than ditches, have an uneven effect, and can cause depletion of the aquifer if they are too deep or pump too much water.

The most effective method is tile or tube drainage. In this method, a network of semi-permeable tubes is laid a few feet below the surface in a regularly spaced grid, just below the root zone and on a slight incline. Originally made of tiles, now plastic, the tops of the tubes are permeable and their bottoms impermeable, allowing water to collect in the tubes and then flow down the tubes and away from the fields. Tile drains effect rapid drainage and maintain the integrity of the aquifer, but they are expensive to install.

Hydrologists and agronomists refer to the difference between the salinity of irrigation water and drainage water as “saline balance.” It is an indicator of normal, healthy irrigation. Under optimal conditions, agricultural drainage will be more saline than the irrigation water applied at the surface. This indicates that the plants are absorbing water while the minerals left in the soil by evaporation and osmosis are being washed out of the root zone. If the salt balance is lower than this, it indicates that salt is accumulating in the soil and will soon damage the plants. If the salt balance is significantly higher, it indicates that “soil washing” is occurring: the irrigation water is flushing extra mineral content out of the soil. This phenomenon is common when a new arid region goes under irrigation for the first time. In



these conditions, drainage can have as much as fifty times more salinity than the irrigation water.

The salinization of water and soil is a serious problem facing world agriculture. It is estimated that 20% of the world's irrigated land – some 62 million hectares, an area the size of France – is affected by salt degradation, causing drops in crop yields and the abandonment of lands. The problem is getting worse. For the past twenty years, an average of 2,000 hectares have been affected by salt degradation every day, equivalent to losing an area the size of Manhattan each week.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, once fields have become degraded by salt, they are impossible to rehabilitate. There are some ways to slow this process, but none to actually stop it, and many of the proposed solutions are prohibitively expensive (such as diverting mineral springs and geysers in the Rocky Mountains into artificial evaporation beds and storing the leftover salt in abandoned mines, or augmentation, that long-cherished hope of Western farmers, involving the diversion of rivers into other river basins to increase their flow). Easier-to-achieve measures include precisely leveling irrigated lands with the help of lasers and graders, to prevent runoff and pooling; the installation of tile drainage; and drip irrigation, which prevents evaporation. But these measures are expensive. In the meantime, increased population and the continued reclamation of arid lands for agriculture only increase the saline pressure on irrigated lands. The Colorado River Salinity Crisis was the first time that salinity leapt to the stage of international politics from the realm of agriculture. Given the continued pace of salt degradation and population growth, however, it will not be the last time.

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<sup>2</sup> “World Losing Farm Soil Daily to Salt-Induced Degradation,” 28 October 2014. United Nations University Institute for Water, the Environment and Health. <<http://inweh.unu.edu/world-losing-farm-soil-daily-salt-induced-degradation/>>

## Chapter One Sediment and Settlement: Mexicali's History to 1961

Nothing has shaped the region known as the Mexicali Valley as much as the Colorado River, but ironically, the river easily escapes the notice of a contemporary visitor. The river is a ghost of its former self, a surprisingly feeble trickle of water, and its riverbed lies far to the east of Mexicali city itself (following local custom, Mexicali refers to the city, and the Mexicali Valley to the large agricultural area that surrounds the city, stretching as far east as Arizona and Sonora and as far south as the Sea of Cortés). Even in the valley amidst the alfalfa fields and feedlots the river is elusive. Except for the odd glimpse through roadside shrubs of a muddy irrigation ditch, and the slightly mineral-smelling water that comes out of the tap, one might forget that the Colorado River exists at all, let alone that the very survival of the place relies on it completely.

There is no missing the influence of the United States, however. The borderline, a tall fence of upright steel poles topped with razor wire, runs right through the city's downtown, hemming in its sprawl and setting it apart from neighboring Calexico, California. The city's urban layout bears the imprint of the Americans who founded it. Its uniform grid mirrors Calexico's, and but for the border many of its north-south streets would continue in the United States. The grid is sliced diagonally from north-west to south-east by the major thoroughfare through town, Boulevard Adolfo López Mateos, starting from the U.S. border crossing, the *garita internacional*, and following the course of the American-built railroad, whose construction enabled Mexicali's founding. Each day a long line of trucks and cars waits in the excruciating sun to cross into the US, while in the last few decades *maquiladora*

factories have sprouted up like mushrooms, churning out goods for import to the United States. The city is also a stopping point for border-crossing migrants, many of them undocumented. Some, from southern Mexico or Central America, gather here before attempting the increasingly dangerous crossing. Others end up in Mexicali after being deported from the United States, sometimes after living, working, and building families there for decades. Out of place in Mexico but unable to return north, they wander Mexicali disoriented and burned by the unforgiving sun.

“Poor Mexico,” Porfirio Díaz famously lamented, “so far from God, so close to the United States.” But the notion that the United States has exerted outsize influence on Mexico had been a truism long before even Díaz’s time. In some ways, Mexicali proves the point. Its social, economic, and political life is closely intertwined with the US and the border. A small example: many middle- and upper-class Mexicalenses I met maintain a post office box in Calexico, and have their important mail and Amazon purchases sent there, trusting the more speedy and reliable U.S.P.S. over *Correos Mexicanos*. Some even own two cars and keep one parked north of the border so as to avoid the long wait that vehicle crossings are subjected to.

Yet in other ways, even border-spanning Mexicali defies the assumption of overwhelming U.S. influence. Crossing the border from the United States into the city brings to mind the reaction of Sal Paradise, Jack Kerouac’s fictional alter ego in *On the Road*: “Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico.”<sup>1</sup> The buildings and cars look different, the sounds are different, the feel is different, and they are all decidedly *Mexican*. In fact, personally speaking, Mexicali is the

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Books, 1997), 274.

least touristy city I have ever visited in Mexico. Apart from the strip clubs, brothels, and dental and medical offices that cater to short-term visitors from the United States, Mexicali has none of the tourist infrastructure, tchotchke vendors, backpacker hostels, or snowbird retirement communities that are as ubiquitous in some Mexican cities as Oxxo convenience stores, taco stands, and curbside shrines to the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Life in Mexicali fits Rachel St. John's observation of borderlands as places that are both extra-national and *extra* national. In the borderlands, the daily patterns of life, commerce and culture pay little heed to national boundaries, and people readily – though not always easily – live lives that span the border and its two cultures. All the while, however, the border remains a place where nations meet face-to-face, where national differences are starkest, and where “market expansion, conquest, state building and identity formation” are central experiences.<sup>2</sup> Nationalism is at times heightened, therefore, even as the experience of daily life defies loyalty to one national identity. The history of Mexicali embodies this paradox. It is a region whose modern origins owe much to U.S. influence, but whose modern development has been marked by the assertion of Mexican control, influence, and nationalism against that U.S. influence. This process unfolded at the local level. And at no other time did local politics exert greater influence than during the salinity crisis.

From 1961 until 1973, the Mexicali Valley became the focal point of a bi-national diplomatic dispute taken up at the highest levels of the Mexican and U.S. governments. The diplomatic approach inevitably shifted how the problem was viewed, abstracting it partly from its local origins and placing it within the orbit of foreign policy. The salinity saga is often remembered primarily as an international dispute: the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: a History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Relations' official history of the issue, for example, is titled *An International Difference*.<sup>3</sup>

Evan Ward, who wrote the only book-length academic history of the salinity problem, argued that the eventual diplomatic resolution of the problem, through negotiations based in Mexico City and Washington, D.C., subsumed the local voices and interests of Mexicalenses.<sup>4</sup> The salinity problem, these accounts hold, lost its local connections when it became the fodder of international politics.

But a too-close focus on the diplomatic aspect of the problem hides the ways that local ecological, political, and economic matters shaped the origins and outcomes of the salinity problem. These local factors, I argue, were central. They determined how and why salinity became a problem in the first place, how the problem turned into a crisis, and how both nations sought to resolve the crisis satisfactorily. The influence of local factors demands a different interpretation of the diplomatic dispute over salinity. The attention that U.S. and Mexican government officials paid to the issue, and the way they approached it, did not mean that local factors were subsumed or ignored, but the opposite – it represented the success of local actors in elevating local matters into the sphere of national and international politics.

To understand the salinity problem, therefore, the unique context of the Mexicali Valley must first be understood. This chapter will recount the history of Mexicali to 1961, the year the salinity problem began. Three factors outweigh all others in shaping the modern history of the Mexicali Valley. The first is the geology and natural history of the Colorado River and the vast Colorado River Delta. The second is the influence of the United States and the effects of U.S development in the region. The third is the 20<sup>th</sup> century process of Mexican

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<sup>3</sup> Mexico and Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *La salinidad del Río Colorado: una diferencia internacional*. (Tlatelolco, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Evan R Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

colonization and assertion of national influence known as *Mexicanización*, which exploited the first to push back against the second. The process of Mexicanización, haphazard and halting but with some clear successes, produced a volatile socio-economic scene by 1961 that amplified the destabilizing effects of the salinity problem. Of course, before there was Mexicali there was the Colorado River, and it is to the river's natural history that we now turn.

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The view from the edge of the Grand Canyon is one of the most spectacular sights on earth. Red and gold bands of sandstone and limestone curve away from the eye in rippling layers. The sun's light is cradled in the bowl of the gorge and reflected between the walls of its buttes, slot canyons, and basins. The sense of perspective is lost in the purple desert air, overpowered by the vast scale of the place and the magnificence of the canyon, created through the slow persistence of the Colorado River, cutting like a saw through the earth, one grain of sandstone at a time.

Millions of people visit the Grand Canyon each year to take in this amazing sight. Equally amazing although less visually spectacular to what lies in front of them is what does *not* lie in front of them: all of the rock, sand and soil and that the river, over millennia, has carried away, giving the Canyon its form. As in the quip that the secret to sculpting a marble elephant is to take a block of marble and chisel away everything that does not look like an elephant, for thousands of years the Colorado River has carried away everything that does not look like the Grand Canyon. It continues this work this very minute (although at a vastly reduced rate, thanks to the dams that hold back its spring floods). The question that arises is: where did all that rock, sand and soil go?

Grain by grain, it went downstream. *Río Colorado* means Red River, and the river got its name because of the immense sediment load it once carried. Born in the Rocky Mountains, the river follows one of the steepest gradients of the world's major rivers, a recipe for massive erosion and sediment transport. Each spring, the melt water of the mountain snowpack would surge down the river, sweeping up silt, sand, rocks and truck-sized boulders with it. In high flood, the river looked like liquid mud, "too thin to plow, too thick to drink," as a local saying had it. Before the river was dammed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, it carried more sediment than any other river in North America, possibly the world. Every year the river carried off more than two hundred million tons of silt – a daily average of five hundred thousand tons, "enough to fill a hundred freight trains, each with a hundred cars, with each car bearing a load of two hundred thousand pounds."<sup>5</sup>

This sediment moved downstream until the river emptied into the Sea of Cortés. The sea was created between five and ten million years ago by the movement of the East Pacific Rise, a spreading center pushing the Pacific Plate away from the North America Plate. This movement gradually pulled what is now the Baja California Peninsula away from the mainland on a 50 millimeter per year course towards Alaska, creating a rift valley that geologists call the Salton Trough. The ocean poured into this rift, creating the Sea of Cortés (also known as the Gulf of California).

The Colorado River once met the sea near the site of present day Yuma, Arizona, and the sea reached as far north as Palm Springs, California. Today, however, it laps the shore far south of Mexicali, its northern coast arcing between the fishing towns of San Felipe and

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<sup>5</sup> Wade Davis, *River Notes: a Natural and Human History of the Colorado* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 17.

Puerto Peñasco. So where did the land in between come from? It was created – slowly but inexorably – by the Colorado River and the enormous amount of silt it carried.

As the river's turbulent flow quieted in the stiller waters of the sea, the sediment suspended within it gradually settled out and deposited on the seafloor. Grain by grain, the sediment built up, reaching the surface and creating dry land around the river's mouth. The Colorado River Delta was born, and it grew rapidly. By one estimate, the river has moved a quadrillion tons of rock, sand and soil from the interior of the continent to the delta since the Sea of Cortés was created.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, the delta grew so large that it reached all the way across the sea to the Baja California Peninsula, creating a natural dike that landlocked the northern end of the sea. Trapped, the seawater there eventually evaporated, creating a dry depression called the Salton Sink that sat several hundred feet below sea level.

The river continued to flow, pouring on top of this dike at its eastern end. Periodically, the river would change course, now flowing downhill to the right (and north) to fill the Salton Sink, now circling back to the south to flow towards the Gulf again, leaving the Salton Sink to dry up once more (most recently, 500 years ago). All the while, the river carried millions of tons of eroded continent onto the Delta, piling sediment and soil up to three and a half miles deep. The southern end of this delta became an enormous estuarine wetland, the largest desert wetland in the world until its demise in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each year the turbid spring floods would rearrange its islands and channels and replenish its soils with a layer of fecund mud. Tides of up to ten meters in the upper Gulf created an enormous intertidal zone where the nutrients of fresh and salt waters mixed and supported an ecosystem

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 194.



teeming with fish, birds, mammals and plant life, and a rich territory for the indigenous groups who lived there.

The natural history and geology of the Delta are more than just a backdrop to this story. They had a dramatic effect on the modern development of the region and, furthermore, shaped how and why the salinity issue arose and became such an intractable problem. To begin with, the water of the Colorado River, matched with the sediments and climate of the delta, made the region attractive around the turn of the century to U.S. settlers seeking sites for irrigated agriculture. They found that the desert could be made to bloom with the help of enormous quantities of river water, channeled onto fields with the help of dams, diversions and canals. The settlement of the region, explained in greater detail below, was hastened by the largesse of the U.S. federal government following the Reclamation Act of 1902, and by the decline of cotton agriculture in the old Southern cotton belt from repeated infestation of the pink boll weevil.<sup>7</sup> Demand for cotton rose at the same time that new irrigation districts were created along the Colorado River and elsewhere. For a time in the twentieth century, these irrigated cotton regions would become among the most productive in the world.

But irrigated agriculture comes with its own problems, and these were made worse by the particular geology of the Colorado River delta. The first is the salinity of the delta's soils. Unlike temperate areas, where regular rainfall washes minerals and salts out of the topsoil, arid regions generally have soils with higher than normal alkalinity. This is particularly acute in the lower Colorado, where the salt content of the seawater that the Delta has over time reclaimed in some places remains in the soil. Moreover, the Colorado basin's geology, which

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<sup>7</sup> On the former, see Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986); Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Worster, *Rivers of Empire*; on the latter, see Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: a Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008).

includes much of the Rocky Mountains, contributes a considerable amount of mineral content, from natural inputs like geothermal hot springs and from the composition of the rock that the river erodes. The Colorado and its delta, in short, are quite salty to begin with.<sup>8</sup>

Minerals lying in the soil and dissolved in water are not necessarily a threat to agriculture, just as long as an irrigator can use a large enough volume of water to flush those salts through the topsoil, and as long as the ground itself is easily and quickly drained. Unfortunately, the Colorado conspires against this. Drainage is particularly difficult in the delta, in no small part because the river often lies at a *higher* elevation than the land around it. This geological curiosity, shared with other silty rivers, is owed to the Colorado's high sediment load. As the river reaches the delta and braids its way towards the sea, some of its sediment settles out, slowly raising its riverbed and banks. These gradually build up, until the riverbed itself stands higher than the land along its banks, running, as Donald Worster put it, "along a self-made ridge, well above the desert floor."<sup>9</sup> Periodic spring floods would cause the river to overflow its banks and flood the low-lying areas next to it, depositing more sediment and starting the whole process anew. For farmers, this topography made irrigation easy: a cut in the riverbank would cause water to flood an adjacent field. Yet it made drainage more difficult, as water diverted onto a field could not drain uphill back into the river's main channel.

Drainage depended therefore on human-made infrastructure (on which more later) and the soil itself. In the latter respect, the delta is hit-or-miss. As the river changed its course through its flat lower regions repeatedly over time, while eroding different geological strata upstream, it left a patchwork of soil profiles across the delta. In some areas, the soil is sandy

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor O. Miller, Gary D. Weatherford, and John E. Thorson, *The Salty Colorado* (The Conservative Foundation - Washington, DC, and John Muir Institute - Napa, CA, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 195.

and easily drained, in other areas, it is heavy with clay with very poor drainage. The profiles vary abruptly, at times between one farmer's plot and the next, or even within the same plot. A farmer unlucky enough to have a low-lying field with clay soils would find achieving good drainage very difficult.

Finally, the desert climate compounded the problems of salinity and drainage. With no rainfall to wash them down through the topsoil, minerals and salts accumulated in the soil. In poorly drained areas, water in the soil rises to the surface via the capillary effect. There, the heat of the sun would evaporate it, leaving its mineral content lying on the surface with the potential to harm plants. These problems became even more complicated when humans modified and colonized the landscape in the twentieth century and began to convert it into an enormous expanse of irrigated cotton agriculture. The Colorado River's natural history, the geological accidents of plate tectonics, Rocky Mountain snowfall, gravity and erosion, working away for a few million years, would combine in the 1960s to vex farmers and governments on both sides of the border.

Today, the Colorado River is no long really a river in the conventional sense. It has not regularly reached the ocean since 1963, when Glen Canyon Dam was completed and Lake Powell began to fill behind it (the reservoir did not reach capacity until 1980). At the southern end of the Mexicali Valley the river is already a tiny muddy trickle, before it dries up completely under the desert sun miles from the sea.<sup>10</sup> The fifteen major dams along its main course, and the hundreds more on its tributaries, have reduced its flow to about a tenth of its former flood-level volume. The river's scouring force has been reduced, and the

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the United States and Mexico coordinated to release a "pulse" of extra water to restore some areas of the delta's riverine habitat. The pulse exceeded expectations and reached the sea; the speed at which long-dormant or vanished riparian ecology rebounded likewise surprised researchers. The experiment was conducted with a view towards restoring the river's flow to the sea, at least periodically, in the future.

sediment it does carry settles out in its reservoirs (and will some day fill them, forming new Colorado River deltas in each one and eventually making icons like Hoover Dam useless). Where once the river ran red, muddy and warm, it is now crystal-clear and icy cold, released from enormous reservoirs, and no longer habitable for the majority of its native fish species. Each year over two million acre-feet of water – more than Mexico’s total annual share of the river - evaporate from those reservoirs into the dry desert air.

The Colorado is among the most engineered, managed, and litigated rivers on earth. More water is diverted out of its basin than any other river, supplying water for more than 30 million people in major cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix, Tucson, Los Angeles, San Diego, Mexicali, and Tijuana, indeed, making the very existence of those cities possible.<sup>11</sup> Without the river, they disappear. People outside of the river’s watershed use its water too, in the food that it irrigates. If you live in North America and had salad or beef for dinner last night, chances are good that there is Colorado River water in your body as you read this. The river irrigates 95% of the lettuce grown in the United States, and 7.5 million acre-feet of its water annually – about half of its total flow – is used to grow alfalfa to fatten beef, with much of the fodder exported to Asia.

Richard White changed how we understand rivers and our relationship to them when he described the Columbia River as an “organic machine.”<sup>12</sup> Humans and nature are not separate, he wrote, but are inextricably linked through work. The river works on people, and people work on the river; both are transformed and their energy directed in new, ever-changing ways. The Colorado today does a lot of work, and people have done a lot of work

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<sup>11</sup> Davis, *River Notes: a Natural and Human History of the Colorado*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

to it. The way this transformative process unfolded, recounted next, formed the context from which the salinity crisis emerged.

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The history of modern Mexicali before 1961 can be divided into two main phases. The first is defined by the role of the United States. Mexicali grew as a south-of-the-border appendage to the U.S. Southwest. The area was settled and developed by U.S. citizens and investors, and the region bears the imprint of this history quite clearly. The second phase is defined by *Mexicanización*, in which the post-Revolutionary Mexican state reclaimed control (or simply claimed, as it had not had much control to begin with) over the region and enacted policies to entice Mexicans to settle there as well as increase Mexican political and economic power. This process did not begin until some three decades after the city's founding, and proceeded haltingly and haphazardly. By 1961 it was by no means complete.

Mexicali is quite a new place by Mexican standards. Unlike other parts of the country, whose histories entail thousands of years of civilization, high population density, advanced agriculture and material culture, Mexicali as we now know it did not begin to exist until barely more than a century ago. Until the mid-1800s, the Colorado River Delta was home only to the Quechan and Cocopah Indians, Yuman-speaking indigenous groups who had lived there for a thousand years. The Cocopah (Cucapá in Spanish) inhabited the southern part of the delta, the Quechan along its northeastern edge near Yuma. They made their living from the river, planting corn, melons, and beans in its floodplains, and hunting the animals that teemed in its marshes and cottonwood and mesquite forests. The first written words describing the Cocopah were penned in 1540 by Pedro Castañeda de Nájera, a member of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's expedition in search of the fabled seven cities

of Cíbola. “They were tall, long-limbed peoples, like giants,” he wrote, and described how, after seven Spaniards had been unable to budge a log needed for firewood, a single Cocopah man had easily hoisted it and carried it on his head.<sup>13</sup> These groups lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle, hunting and farming along the river for most of the year, then moving to the mountains that cradle the valley on its western side – now called the Sierra de los Cucapás – during the blistering heat of summer to hunt and gather foods like pinyon nuts.

The Spanish made little progress in colonizing the Baja California peninsula during the colonial period, and even less in the Colorado Delta. Settlement of the peninsula was limited to a string of missions, initiated by Jesuits in 1697 at Nuestra Señora de San Loreto, constructed along the slopes of the sierras that run like a backbone down the peninsula. When the Jesuits were expelled from Mexico in 1767, the indigenous population of the peninsula had dropped from an estimated 45,000 to around 7,000, due mostly to diseases introduced by the Spanish, exploitative conditions on the missions, and war between the Spaniards and rebellious indigenous groups.<sup>14</sup> The Franciscan and then Dominican orders took over the missions, until they were secularized following Mexico’s independence from Spain.

The Cocopahs and Quechans of the Delta, however, mostly resisted outside influence until the mid-1800s. After the Mexican-American war and the establishment of the international border, their traditional territory was cut in half. In the early twentieth century, reinforcement of the border and stricter controls on migration left a group of Cocopahs north of the border cut off from the Cucapá groups remaining in the Mexican side of the Delta, and

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Miguel León Portilla et al., *Baja California: historia breve* (México: Fondo De Cultura Económica ; El Colegio de México, 2010), 29. My translation.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 46.

unable to undertake their customary seasonal migrations.<sup>15</sup> (This situation continues today, just one more of the border's tragic quirks.) Outsiders for the first time entered the Colorado River Delta in significant numbers in the 1850s, drawn by the California gold rush. Yet they came mostly as passengers on steamships, heading towards Fort Yuma (established in 1849) and deeper into the U.S. interior. Steamship travel on the lower Colorado declined in the late 1870s in the face of competition from railroads.<sup>16</sup>

Development and settlement of Mexico's remote and sparsely populated north became a high priority during the Porfiriato. In 1877, the Mexican-born businessman Guillermo Andrade, living at the time in San Francisco, won a concession to develop 305,735 hectares of land in the Colorado Delta from the government of Porfirio Díaz.<sup>17</sup> The concession obliged him to attract settlers who would farm the land and turn the Delta into an agricultural region. In 1888, Andrade converted the concession into a property title, making him the direct owner of virtually the entire Mexican Delta.<sup>18</sup> Yet no actual settlement took place, and in 1896 Andrade teamed with U.S. investors to form the California Development Company, registered in New Jersey. Shortly thereafter, Andrade purchased the Rancho de los Algodones (around the present day city of Algodones), the only settlement in the Mexican side of the Delta outside of the Cucapá *rancherías* in the lower Delta. However, legal restrictions prevented Andrade from transferring his concession to the company, so in 1898 Andrade formed la Sociedad de Irrigación y Terrenos de la Baja California (later renamed la Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas de Baja California) as a subsidiary of the U.S.-owned

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<sup>15</sup> For more information, see <[www.cocopah.com](http://www.cocopah.com)>.

<sup>16</sup> William Oral Hendricks, *Guillermo Andrade y el desarrollo del delta mexicano del Río Colorado, 1874-1905* (UABC, 1996), 50.

<sup>17</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Border Oasis*.

Colorado Development Company, owned by Charles Rockwood and other U.S. investors. A year later, Andrade transferred his concession to the company, and construction of irrigation works began.

Rockwood's vision was to settle the Imperial Valley, the northern extension of the Colorado Delta on the US side, which gradually slopes downwards to the north towards the Salton Sink. The plan was a speculative venture. Rockwood hoped to construct irrigation works that would attract settlers and tenant-farmers, thus recouping the initial investment in land and irrigation infrastructure. He named the valley Imperial in keeping with his ambitions for it.

The only hitch in the plan was geography. East of the Imperial Valley lies a line of enormous sand dunes, which runs north-south parallel to the Colorado River and bulges slightly into Mexican territory. To construct a gravity-fed canal bringing water from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley would require an enormous cut through these dunes, an expense Rockwood could not afford. The solution was to run a canal through Mexican territory, south of where the dunes ended, and then curve it back north into the Imperial Valley. Gravity would send water from diversion works along the Colorado River's main channel all the way to lands in California. The canal ran along the dried bed of the Álamó River, a defunct former branch of the Colorado created during one of its periodic floods some decades before, and was therefore named the Álamó Canal, although sometimes called the Imperial Canal.

The CDC's interest in the Andrade concession was to facilitate the construction of this canal, which began in 1900. Upon its completion in 1901, the company presented a *fait accompli* to the Díaz government, which had never in fact authorized the twice-border



crossing canal.<sup>19</sup> Díaz granted the company an after-the-fact concession to operate the canal, but stipulated that half of the water it carried be reserved for use on the Mexican side. With the canal constructed and the concession won, the CDC no longer needed Andrade's lands in the Mexican side of the delta, and so in 1903 Andrade sold his title – virtually the entire Mexican portion of the Colorado Delta – to another US company, the Colorado River Land Company, owned by Harrison Otis and his son-in-law Harry Chandler. Otis and Chandler also owned the *Los Angeles Times*, and were both wealthy and politically powerful.<sup>20</sup>

The settlement of the Mexican side thus occurred hand in glove with development in the United States. Rockwood and the CDC established the towns of Imperial City, Brawley, Blythe, Heber, Holtville, Calexico, and Mexicali (in 1903; its initial urban grid was designed by Charles Rockwood himself).<sup>21</sup> Mexicali, initially a cluster of a few dozen houses, was populated mostly by Mexicans who had worked on the construction of the Álamo Canal. The railroad reached Imperial City in 1902, was extended to Mexicali by 1904, and reached Yuma in 1906. Hundreds of farmers bought or leased land in the Imperial Valley and began growing cotton and other crops.

South of the border, Otis and Chandler's Colorado River Land Co. – or “la Colorado,” as Mexicans called it – slowly developed its more than three hundred thousand hectares of land. Initially pasturing cattle on the Colorado's floodplains and harvesting wild hemp in the uplands further from the river, after 1908 the company leased land to increasing numbers of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian settlers who grew cotton at the company's behest

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<sup>19</sup> Emilio López Zamora, *El agua, la tierra: los hombres de México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, *Border Oasis*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*, 117.

and other subsistence crops.<sup>22</sup> These tenant farmers were given ten-year sharecropping contracts, agreeing to give 50% of their pay to the CRLC and processing their entire crop in CRLC-owned facilities.<sup>23</sup> The company preferred Chinese and other foreigners to Mexicans for several reasons. First, it was cheaper and quicker to transport Chinese settlers from California than workers from Mexico, which, separated by vast distances without roads or settlements, required a long voyage by sea and land. Second, growing xenophobia in California saw increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants pushed out of the state, unable to buy property and frequently persecuted. Finally, Mexican laws provided means for Mexican citizens to claim title to lands they worked for an extended period of time; these laws did not extend to Asian immigrants, meaning the company did not risk losing its lands. By 1915, 42% of Mexicali's population was Chinese; another 9% was Japanese, although Japanese farmers leased the largest tracts of land.<sup>24</sup> Although the majority of Asian settlers lost their land during the agrarian reform of the 1930s, Mexicali today has Mexico's largest Chinese-descended population and is famous for its Chinese food, which deliciously incorporates elements of Mexican cuisine. Similarly, Ensenada's famous fish tacos were born as an adaptation of Japanese tempura cooking techniques.

By 1904, the CDC's irrigation canals to the Imperial Valley had already begun to clog under the Colorado's unstoppable sediment. Settlers in the valley saw their water supply dwindle as freshly dredged canals silted up in a matter of days. Rockwood attempted to clear sediment from the wooden control gate that diverted water from the Colorado into the canal, to no avail. With the CDC's money dwindling and Imperial Valley farmers clamoring for

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<sup>22</sup> Walsh, *Building the Borderlands*.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Border Oasis*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Boime, "'Beating Plowshares into Swords': The Colorado River Delta, the Yellow Peril, and the Movement for Federal Reclamation, 1901-1928," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 1 (2009), 32.

water, Rockwood took the desperate step of cutting a new diversion gate south of the old one. In the company's haste it did not sufficiently reinforce the works, and when an unusually large spring runoff in 1905 reached the Delta, the force of the water broke through the gate, diverting the entire flow of close to 300,000 cubic feet per second of Colorado River into the Álamó Canal. Since sediment deposition has over time lifted the riverbed higher than its floodplains, there was nothing to stop gravity from drawing the river out of its normal streambed. The entire river changed course, swerving north towards the Salton Sink, as it had done periodically in the past. The full force of the river poured into the Imperial Valley, creating "a twenty-foot falls moving backward at a slow walk" as it scoured away the Valley's soils and flooded thousands of hectares of cropland before the astonished eyes of local inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

The flood swept away all of Mexicali except for its customs house. Vast swathes of the Mexicali and Imperial Valleys were ruined. The Salton Sink gradually filled with water to become the Salton Sea, which remains California's largest body of water.<sup>26</sup> The CDC was bankrupted by the struggle to plug the half-mile wide breach, and was taken over by the Southern Pacific Railway. For a year and a half, crews dumped railcar after railcar of rock fill into the new channel attempting to diver the flow, only to see the river sweep it all away. Finally, later in 1907 the river's flow abated, and the railway crews succeeded in filling the

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<sup>25</sup> Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*.

<sup>26</sup> The Salton Sea's history is a fascinating chapter in the stranger-than-fiction story of water development in the Southwest. From its origins as manmade disaster, over the twentieth century the Sea became a crucial stop for migratory birds on the Pacific flyway, as other bird habitats in the state were destroyed by water and irrigation projects. In its heyday it also became a mecca for recreation and tourism. Yet because the Sea receives all of the irrigation drainage from the Coachella and Imperial Valleys and has no outlet to the ocean, it has shrunk in size and become increasingly salty over time. Agricultural pollution, untreated sewage from Mexicali (which flows via the New River, which was created during the 1905-1907 flood) and massive fish die-offs are degrading its habitat for migratory birds. Salt and sediment left as its waters recede are picked up by the wind and cause respiratory ailments for nearby residents, many of them low-income retirees or migrant agricultural workers. See Dana Goodyear, "The Dying Sea," *The New Yorker*, May 4, 2015.

gap. The river returned to its regular course at last, flowing south into the Sea of Cortés for the first time in two years. Mexicali slowly recuperated, and by 1910 the city was home to 462 inhabitants and the Valley even more, many of them Chinese, living in a seamless connection with the city of Calexico and much more closely integrated with U.S. circuits of money, transportation, and culture than with Mexican ones.<sup>27</sup>

The *Mexicanización* of the Mexicali region began with the Mexican Revolution, which affected Baja California much differently, and much less severely, than other parts of Mexico. In January 1911, the anarchist brothers Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, living in Los Angeles, sent a contingent of seventeen men to capture Mexicali. The response highlights the curious culture of the borderlands. Even as Porfirio Díaz ordered the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion to protect irrigation works belonging to the US-owned CRLC and the Imperial Irrigation District, Celso Vega, Baja California's *jefe político y militar*, gathered forces in response to troop mobilizations in California, which many Baja Californians interpreted as a precursor to invasion, and to repulse the Magonistas. After early successes in which they captured and held Algodones, Tecate, and Tijuana, in June the Magonistas succumbed to internal factional disputes and pressure from U.S. troops. Some surrendered, others were arrested, and some fled across the border and were arrested in the United States.<sup>28</sup> This was the last Revolutionary combat Baja California would see.

Indeed, the Revolution began the *Mexicanización* of the Mexicali Valley in large part simply by ignoring it. While much of the rest of Mexico plunged into chaos and destruction between 1913 and 1920, for Mexicali these were peaceful and prosperous years. As conditions worsened in other parts of the country, a growing stream of migrants and internal

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<sup>27</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 120-125.

refugees poured into the Mexicali Valley. In 1915, Pancho Villa appointed Esteban Cantú the *jefe militar* of Baja California. He moved the territory's capital to Mexicali from Ensenada, its largest and most wealthy city (allegedly to sidestep the influence of businessmen who opposed him there) and in 1917 was confirmed as governor by Venustiano Carranza. Cantú oversaw a surge in construction and development. In addition to improving schools, plumbing, paving and lighting in Mexicali, Cantú ordered the construction of the first road between Mexicali, Tecate, and Ensenada. For the first time, it was possible to travel between these cities without first crossing into the United States (there was still no land link between the peninsula and the rest of Mexico, however). While the country as a whole lost a million people to death and displacement during this time period, the population of northern Baja more than doubled, to 23,537.<sup>29</sup>

Cantú also encouraged – and profited from – the growth of vice tourism along the border. Anti-vice laws passed in the US in 1911 saw the rapid appearance of bars, brothels and casinos in Mexicali and Tijuana. Cantú's growing wealth, his nepotism, widespread xenophobic resentment of his permissive attitude towards Chinese migration (the Colorado River Land Company had to pay a head tax of \$140 U.S. dollars for each Chinese immigrant it brought into Mexico; \$40 of that amount went directly to Cantú<sup>30</sup>), and his political ambiguity – sliding from *Villismo* to *Convencionalismo* to *Constitucionalismo* – drew the suspicion of the Sonoran Dynasty. When Cantú publicly opposed the election of Álvaro Obregon, the latter sent General Abelardo Rodríguez with troops to depose him. Cantú exhorted Baja Californians to rise up in arms against Rodríguez; none did, so he fled across

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 127-132.

<sup>30</sup> María Eugenia Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali* (Tijuana, Baja California, México: Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1995), 75-76.

the border and settled in Los Angeles. He was permitted to return to Mexico in 1953 and became a senator at age 70, before dying in poverty in Mexicali in 1966.<sup>31</sup>

Rodríguez became governor of Baja California in 1923 and ruled until 1929. Like Cantú, he oversaw a population and construction boom and became enormously wealthy through corruption. Rodríguez offered a favorable climate for entrepreneurs, provided they granted him a personal stake in their ventures, and the state economy and his fortune grew hand in hand. He created the *Banco Agrícola Peninsular*, which stimulated agriculture by offering loans to farmers, and offered similar support to fisheries. He established dozens of new urban and rural schools and increased teachers' salaries. He fomented industrial growth with the establishment of cotton gins, flourmills, and breweries. But he is perhaps best remembered for the enormous casinos and brothels which sprouted in Mexicali and Tijuana, many of which he owned or had interests in. By the time he became president of Mexico in 1932, Rodríguez was a millionaire.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most consequential processes started by Rodríguez was the gradual takeover of the lands of the Colorado River Land Company and their transfer to Mexican citizens. This began haphazardly and often corruptly. It established an unequal, two-tiered system of landholding in the Mexicali Valley that would lead to serious political tension in the decades to come.

As late as the mid-30s, most of the land in the Mexicali Valley remained the property of the Colorado River Land Company. But demand for land grew as the Mexican population of the Valley swelled through the 1920s. Refugees from the Revolution and the *Cristiada* poured into Mexicali in search of opportunity. Migration grew after 1929 as Mexicans

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<sup>31</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*, 132.

<sup>32</sup> G. M Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 87.

returned or were deported from the United States during the Great Depression. Chinese immigration dwindled in the face of widespread racial animosity and the growing Mexican workforce, a dramatic change from the first decade of the century, when few Mexicans desired or were able to reach Mexicali. The clamor for land distribution came to a head between 1922 and 1924, when a former Villista colonel named Marcelino Magaña Mejía led 2000 followers in an invasion of uncultivated CRLC lands. Governor Rodríguez had Magaña arrested and jailed in the penal colony of Isla María, and then cut the legs from his movement by offering plots of land in *colonias* (agrarian communities with privately-owned lands, in contrast to the communally-held *ejido* system) to followers who renounced him.<sup>33</sup>

Gradually, Rodríguez established a haphazard colonization policy, which involved buying or embargoing land from the Colorado River Land Company and selling it at an inflated price to *colonos* (*colonia* land owners). Usually, Rodríguez pocketed a portion of the sale, and many *colonos* never received legal deeds to their properties.<sup>34</sup> By the early 1930s, the sale of Valley land had become a major source of government revenue. A survey by the *Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento* in 1934 showed that the Valley had 40 *colonias* populated by 1631 *colonos* and their families, who owned 107,000 hectares, of which 89,000 Ha had irrigation.<sup>35</sup>

The *Mexicanización* of Mexicali took a decisive step under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), who distributed more land across Mexico than all of his predecessors combined. As Casey Walsh has shown, land distribution in northern Mexico focused on fomenting cotton agriculture, partly to bring peace and stability to the countryside (and

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<sup>33</sup> Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81.

groom law-abiding citizens), partly to increase foreign exchange, and partly in response to the economic crisis brought on by the Great Depression.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, while the impetus for agrarian reform in Mexicali was to shore up Mexican numbers and influence in the region while generating foreign exchange through cotton agriculture, the actual process unfolded haphazardly and incompletely in response to changing circumstances.

With demands for land increasing, in 1936 Cárdenas forced the Colorado River Land Company to sign a *contrato de colonización* (colonization contract), in which it promised to sell off the more than 200,000 hectares of land it still owned to individual farmers within twenty years. The contract raised hopes, but the company made little effort to carry it out. In January 1937, a group of land-seekers led an invasion of company land that became known as the *Asalto a las Tierras* (Assault on the Lands). In response, Cárdenas decreed redistribution for the 102,000 Ha that the company had under cultivation at the time (a great deal of it by Chinese and Japanese sharecroppers who had worked the same plots for decades but did not qualify for land redistribution). The Mexican government nationalized the company's cultivated land, and began to convert it into new *ejidos* (agrarian communities where lands are owned communally and cannot be sold, even if they may be cultivated individually). Cárdenas appointed Colonel Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada as the new governor of Baja California to oversee the land redistribution, and it proceeded very quickly.

Ejidatorios, who were generally former day laborers, returnees from the United States, or migrants from other parts of Mexico, were granted twenty hectares each, much more than the four to six hectares granted in other parts of Mexico. They were also offered agricultural equipment and cash loans to start planting. 44 new ejidos were soon formed,

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<sup>36</sup> Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: a Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), 7.



their names symbolizing nationalist optimism or the state of origin of their settlers, such as Ejido Progreso, Ejido Plan de Ayala, Ejido Durango. More than 30 rural schools were founded. In 1938, the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos established the *Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado número 14* (Colorado River Irrigation District Number 14), a local body that apportioned and regulated irrigation water, paid for in part by water users and the SRH. Unlike in other parts of Mexico, where the construction of dams and irrigation systems had been a foundational element of agrarian reform since the 1926 creation of the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación, Mexicali's irrigation system was constructed by the Colorado River Land Company and transferred virtually wholesale to the Distrito de Riego.<sup>37</sup>

The rapidity of the land redistribution belied its problems. Most troublingly, the creation of ejidos cemented a dual system of landholding in the Mexicali Valley, split between communal ownership (ejidos) and private ownership (colonias). Prior to Cárdenas, land distributed in Mexicali had been in the form of private plots. The Cárdenas-era redistribution not only created a new class of landowners, but it reinforced the old one. As the company's lands were broken up and reorganized, many tenant-farmers who had worked the same plots for years, if not decades, found themselves forced off their land and unable to qualify for membership in the new ejidos. After prolonged protests, Cárdenas agreed to sell these farmers plots in four new colonias, Venustiano Carranza, Baja California, Coahuila, and Nuevo León.<sup>38</sup>

The two forms of landholding were not equal. While ejidatorios worked 20 Ha each, colonos and *pequeños propietarios* (small property owners whose lands were not affiliated

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<sup>37</sup> The Alamo Canal, however, continued to be the property of the Imperial Irrigation District. For more on post-Revolutionary irrigation projects, see Luis Aboites, *La irrigación revolucionaria: historia del sistema nacional de riego del Río Conchos, Chihuahua, 1927-1938* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Educación Pública : CIESAS, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali*, 77.

with colonias but existed as separate *ranchos*), were sold 100 Ha each (in 1946 Miguel Alemán amended Article 27 of the Constitution to allow colonos to be sold 150 Ha each if the land was planted in cotton<sup>39</sup>). Those with the means to do so were able to purchase more land and increase their holdings to up to 1000 Ha or more (often by purchasing other properties and registering them under the names of family members). The disparity widened after 1946, when the Colorado River Land Company sold its remaining land to the Mexican government. Cárdenas's presidential successors Manuel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán sold much of the land off as colonias, rather than redistributing it as ejidos.<sup>40</sup> By 1956, the Distrito de Riego reported that the Valley had 5,653 ejidatorios cultivating an area of 116,546 Ha, and 3,799 colonos cultivating 157,781 Ha.<sup>41</sup> Much fewer colonos, in short, worked much more land than the more numerous ejidatorios.

Colonos not only had more land, their property could be put up as collateral for agrarian loans. Non-transferable ejido plots could not. Private property owners thus had much greater access to credit, an essential element for capital-intensive cotton agriculture. Larger plots and more money to invest in them produced, unsurprisingly, much higher yields and bigger harvests. The disparity became more marked over time, with private property owners better able to invest in land, seed, fertilizer, equipment, irrigation infrastructure during boom times and better able to weather lean ones than ejidatorios.

Moreover, *Mexicanización* did not end the dominance of U.S. capital in the Mexicali Valley, but merely restructured it. The Colorado River Land Company ceased to be the

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<sup>39</sup> Aidé Grijalva, "Agroindustria y Algodón En El Valle de Mexicali: La Compañía Industrial Jabonera Del Pacífico," *Estudios Fronterizos* 15, no. 30 (December 2014), 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>41</sup> These numbers only include the head of family, usually male, appearing on the property deed or ejidal register. The actual population numbers are therefore much higher. Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali*, 123.

owner of virtually the entire Valley. Yet U.S. businesses continued to control the majority of agricultural financing, crop processing, agricultural services, and commerce. Most agricultural credit continued to be disbursed by U.S. companies, including the Anderson, Clayton Company – known in Mexicali as *la Clayton* – the largest cotton company in the world. The loans were given on the condition that the farmer deliver his crop to the loaning institution, so U.S.-owned firms likewise dominated the ginning, grading, packing and export of cotton fiber and the industrial processing of cottonseed. The largest of these was an Anderson, Clayton subsidiary called *la Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico* – known locally as *la Jabonera*, or soapmaker – which at mid-century was the most modern cotton processing plant in the world.<sup>42</sup>

U.S. capital not only financed individual farmers on a seasonal basis, but helped to fund the development of Mexican state institutions as well. In 1938, the foreign exchange crisis caused by the national oil expropriation threatened the program of land redistribution started the previous year. Lázaro Cárdenas, pushed by Bank of Mexico president Luis Montes de Oca, struck a deal with the Anderson, Clayton Company in which for the following three years *La Jabonera* would finance loans made by the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal in Mexicali, and would pay for the operations of the Distrito de Riego for the first few months of each year, until its funding arrived from the *Comisión Nacional de Irrigación*.<sup>43</sup> In exchange, the company received assurances that its Mexicali Valley properties would be spared future expropriations, and the opportunity to increase investment outside of the United States helped it to make up for production cutbacks under New Deal

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<sup>42</sup> Aidé Grijalva, “Agroindustria y Algodón En El Valle de Mexicali: La Compañía Industrial Jabonera Del Pacífico,” *Estudios Fronterizos* 15, no. 30 (December 2014): 11–42, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

legislation designed to stabilize a glutted cotton market.<sup>44</sup> Revolutionary agrarian reform in Mexicali, in other words, was financed by the U.S. cotton industry.

What difference this made is difficult to gauge. Only 5% of Mexicali farmers, including ejidatorios, received credit through the ejidal bank – the rest secured loans directly from the cotton companies anyway.<sup>45</sup> In certain respects, the deal was a good one for the Mexican government: it received free financing for a major Revolutionary project that expanded the state's influence over an area that had long eluded its control. It is an example of the ways the Mexican government, far from being dominated by foreign business, has used it to its own advantage.<sup>46</sup> The Anderson Clayton deal demonstrates the Mexican state's strength over foreign business, not its vulnerability.

On the other hand, the weakness of the ejidal bank undercut the Mexican government's power over Mexican citizens. The availability of private credit meant the ejidal bank could not be used for political coercion. Elsewhere in Mexico, where the bank was the only source of agrarian credit, it became a tool to enforce loyalty to the PRI. Ejidatorios who rocked the boat politically could lose their access to credit and thus livelihood.<sup>47</sup> In Mexicali, where the vast majority of farmers were financed by the cotton industry, this was simply not possible. This contributed to the unusually independent political scene in Mexicali, and the relative strength of the opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, PAN) there. Thus while the cotton companies underwrote the expansion of PRI influence into Mexicali, they simultaneously undercut one of the coercive tools of PRI authoritarianism.

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<sup>44</sup> The company and the Mexican government achieved similar deals in other cotton-growing regions in Mexico. Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: a Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), 118-119.

<sup>45</sup> Grijalva, "Agroindustria y Algodón En El Valle de Mexicali," 34.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Wasserman, *Pesos and Politics: Business, Elites, Foreigners, and Government in Mexico, 1854-1940*, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen H Haber, *Mexico Since 1980* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Culturally and politically, though, it is indisputable that the cotton industry held considerable influence in Mexicali. The Valley's seventeen cotton companies (only one of which was Mexican-owned) formed a trade organization called the *Asociación Algodonera del Valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali Valley Cotton Association) to lobby for their interests. Company executives served on the boards of local banks, and generally moved in – if not created – important local circles of politics and finance.<sup>48</sup>

Land redistribution, therefore, had mixed results. It led to a wave of Mexican migration to Mexicali, a restructuring of landholding patterns, the transfer of ownership of virtually the entire Valley from private, U.S. ownership to Mexican state and individual ownership and cultivation. Yet it also institutionalized an unequal system of ejido and colonia landholding, and maintained (in fact, relied on and bolstered) the financial power of U.S.-owned cotton agribusiness. Moreover, it intensified a zero-sum competition for water within and between the United States and Mexico that set in motion the chain of events leading to the salinity crisis.

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As important to *Mexicanización* as the reclaiming and redistribution of the lands of the Mexicali Valley was the division of the water of the Colorado River. By the early 1940s, Mexico continued to be entirely reliant on the United States for its water and had no legal guarantee to the Colorado's flow (the 1848 Waters Treaty had only guaranteed navigation rights on the Colorado). The Colorado, of course, flows through the United States before reaching Mexico. Even more crucially, all of the water channeled to Mexicali Valley farms

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<sup>48</sup> For a vivid, if nostalgic, look at the daily workings of the cotton companies and the experiences of its employees and executives, see James Griffin and Aidé Grijalva, *Aquellos años del algodón: la Jabonera y el Valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, Baja California, México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2008).

came via the Álamo Canal, which, strange as it seems, was the property of the Imperial Irrigation District in California. Although Mexico had expropriated the Colorado River Land Company and its land, the concession to operate the canal belonged to the Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas de Baja California, a subsidiary of the defunct Colorado Development Company that had been reorganized into the Imperial Irrigation District following its 1907 bankruptcy during the flood that created the Salton Sea.<sup>49</sup> Until the concession expired in 1961, the company charged 2.20 pesos per 1000 cubic meters of water that flowed through the canal, an amount covered half by the Mexican federal government and half by Mexicali farmers via the Distrito de Riego.<sup>50</sup>

This dependence on the United States for water made observers in Mexicali and the Mexican government increasingly nervous as competition for Colorado River water within the United States heightened in the early decades of the twentieth century. Much of the urgency was due to a quirk of water law in the United States known as the principle of “prior appropriation.” The old English water law, called the Riparian Doctrine, held that people living alongside a river could use its water so long as they did not alter its flow or quality for downstream users. The Supreme Court of Colorado overturned this principle in 1882, instead endorsing the right of prior appropriation.<sup>51</sup> This principle, also known as “first in time, first in right,” holds that whoever first puts a given volume water from a given source to beneficial use (i.e. irrigation, consumption, power generation and the like) establishes a

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<sup>49</sup> The IID, established in 1911, was a semi-private, semi-federal agency that split the costs of water infrastructure and divided irrigation water among Imperial Valley users. For a critical view, see Worster, *Rivers of Empire*.

<sup>50</sup> The Imperial Valley, in turn was dependent on Mexicali: since it got its water through the Álamo Canal as well, it was technically downstream of Mexicali. Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> Wade Davis, *River Notes: A Natural and Human History of the Colorado* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 44.

permanent, perpetual right to that volume of water. While others may subsequently claim a share of water from the same source, in times of shortage the first user's rights must be satisfied in full before any other user receives so much as a drop. This rule was designed to ensure that those who invested in irrigation infrastructure would have the water necessary to pay for it given the long amortization periods required for dams and the like. One of its major consequences has been to incentivize a race to put every possible gallon of water to use, whether needed or not. Moreover, as development and population growth have accelerated over time, it has created absurd disparities in access to water based on long-distant, even ancestral water claims.

The competition for the Colorado's water become so intense by the early 1920s that the U.S. states that share the river's basin came together to formally divide its water between them. The resulting 1922 agreement, called the Colorado River Compact, is crucial to the history of the U.S. west; Marc Reisner called it "the western equivalent of the Constitution."<sup>52</sup> The Compact divided the Colorado at Lee's Ferry, Arizona (arbitrarily, from a geological standpoint), into an Upper Basin, of Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Utah, and a Lower Basin, of Nevada, Arizona, and California. The annual flow of the river, estimated at 17.5 million acre-feet per year, would be divided roughly in half between the two basins, with a few million acre-feet set aside to satisfy Mexico and various Indian reservations with pre-existing claims. The Compact also established a legal framework that obligated the Upper Basin (where almost all of the Colorado's water comes from, in the form of snowpack and rain in the Rocky Mountains) to deliver the Lower Basin's annual allotment via dams and reservoirs that would be constructed by the United States Bureau of

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<sup>52</sup> He noted, however, that it "didn't settle much," given the disagreements it subsequently caused. Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 124.

Reclamation. Along with creating the blueprint for Western development, the Compact destined the Colorado to be the most engineered, managed, and litigated river in the world.

Problems dogged the Compact from the start, as might be expected. The basin states did not ratify the agreement until 1928, except Arizona, which waited until 1944 to ratify it (Arizona's representatives felt California's share was too big). A more serious problem became clear later on. Hydrologists had estimated the Colorado's flow, based on the average flow of the previous decade, at around 18 million acre-feet per year. That decade, it turns out, was one of abnormally high rainfalls – perhaps the wettest in a thousand years, according to historical climatologists.<sup>53</sup> The Compact guaranteed shares of close to 18 million acre-feet per year; the river's actual flow is closer to 14 million acre-feet per year – and has been even lower than that during the drought of the past decade and a half (the current drought is perhaps the normal climate for the basin, with the 20<sup>th</sup> century anomalously rainy). The Compact, in short, promised far more water than was available.

Although the Compact set aside an undefined surplus for Mexico, it did not constitute an actual legal guarantee for Mexico's share. Yet because of the law of prior appropriation, the lack of a treaty actually worked in Mexico's interests: whatever water it could put to use in the present could be claimed in future negotiations.<sup>54</sup> In the absence of a treaty, therefore, the continuing colonization of the Mexicali Valley would guarantee Mexico a greater share of the water. Indeed, Dorothy Pierson Kerig has argued that the timing of land distribution in

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<sup>53</sup> Davis, *River Notes*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Norris Hundley Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 74.



Mexicali can be explained as an effort to secure a greater share of the river's water for Mexico before U.S. users laid claim to it.<sup>55</sup>

Soon, infrastructure development in the United States made a formal, binding agreement a priority for Mexico. In 1936, Boulder Dam (later renamed Hoover) was completed, a miracle of engineering that Marc Reisner called the “greatest structure on earth, perhaps the most important structure that has ever been built in the United States.”<sup>56</sup> For the first time, humans could capture and store the water of the Colorado River, corralling its enormous spring floods, proportioning its flow year-round, and removing its enormous sediment load (thus stalling the growth of the Colorado River Delta and creating a new delta in Lake Mead, the reservoir behind the dam, filling it with sediment at a rate of tens of thousands of tons per year). In 1942, the Bureau of Reclamation completed construction of a new canal between the Colorado and the Imperial Valley. It ended the Imperial Valley's dependence on the Álamo Canal (which passed through Mexico, and whose concession guaranteed Mexico 50% of the water that flowed through the canal) by cutting through the Algodones Dunes and running west virtually parallel to the border.<sup>57</sup> For the first time, the United States had the infrastructure to completely cut off Mexico from the flow of the

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<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Pierson Kerig, *El valle de Mexicali y la Colorado River Land Company, 1902-1946* (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> He also gives an excellent account of its construction. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> The canal has produced resentment in the Mexicali Valley up to the present day. In the section that cut through the dunes, the All-American Canal was unlined (i.e. constructed of dirt, not cement) and therefore allowed significant water infiltration into the ground. Flowing through underground geological strata, this water re-emerged aboveground in Mexico east of Mexicali city, flooding a large agricultural area. After the SRH constructed ditches to drain the land and return it to productivity, the underground infiltrations from the canal helped replenish wells that Mexican farmers grew to depend on. In the early 2000s, the Bureau of Reclamation lined the entire length of the canal in impermeable concrete, thus cutting off the underground flow and drying up wells that Mexican farmers had used for decades. Mexican efforts to fight the lining failed. For details of the controversy, see Roberto Elenes, *Aguas Enturbiadas: Litigio Internacional Por Aguas Filtradas Del Canal Todo Americano Promovido Por Organismos Ciudadanos* (Mexicali, Baja California, México: Consejo de Desarrollo Económico de Mexicali, A.C., 2009).

Colorado River. The time had come for Mexico to negotiate a treaty guaranteeing it a share of the river's water.

Negotiations for a treaty began in 1942. For the next two years, the Departments of State and the Interior, the Secretarías de Relaciones Exteriores and Recursos Hidráulicos, and the seven U.S. riparian states, represented two each by a group called the Council of Fourteen, hashed out a controversial agreement of how to divide the waters of the Grande/Bravo, Tijuana, and Colorado Rivers. Mexico pushed to receive 2 million acre-feet from the Colorado per year. The Council of Fourteen wanted to give Mexico only 900,000 acre-feet per year. The negotiations were complicated by intense competition among the U.S. riparian states. California wanted to deliver Mexico's share through the Pilot Knob gate, a dam on the All-American Canal where a hydro-electric generating station had been constructed (providing Mexico its share would thus help generate electricity that would be sold to help fund the Imperial Irrigation District). A larger share for Mexico, then, would benefit California. Arizona took the opposite position. It had still not ratified the Colorado River Compact and fiercely disputed California's share of 4.4 million acre-feet per year. It believed that a generous share for Mexico would steal water that Arizona planned to divert for the planned Central Arizona Project (a multi-billion dollar plan to divert the Colorado to irrigate one million acres in the environs of Phoenix; finally authorized in 1968, and mostly constructed by the mid '90s, it is still not fully constructed today).

The ferocity of the competition between California and Arizona (or for water in the west generally) should not be underestimated. Indeed, it led to a colorful incident in 1934, when the Bureau of Reclamation began building Parker Dam on the Colorado. Learning of this, Arizona Governor Benjamin Moeur sent the National Guard to prevent the Bureau

construction crews from working on the Arizona side of the river. The troops set up machine gun emplacements and requisitioned ferryboats, creating, briefly, an Arizona Navy (which, ironically, had to be rescued by the Bureau construction crew when one of the boats swamped while patrolling at night). The Supreme Court ruled in Arizona's favor, that the dam had not been authorized, though Congress soon passed a bill authorizing it *ex post facto*.<sup>58</sup>

The disagreement between California and Arizona was finally resolved with an agreement that would have enormous consequences for Mexicali. If a genesis of the salinity crisis exists, this would be it. The agreement conceded both states the volume of river water they wanted by deciding that Mexico's share could be made up in part by "return" water – essentially, the drainage from irrigation that trickles back into the river from agricultural fields – as opposed to "virgin" water, or water straight from the river's main flow. Return water is typically much higher in mineral content, which it dissolves as it percolates through the soil. Yet counting return flow in Mexico's share meant that the Lower Basin's volume of water could be doubly apportioned: drainage water from Arizona could be used again to satisfy Mexico's claims. The return flow compromised enabled magical arithmetic that turned the Lower Basin's total share of 7.5 million acre-feet per year into 9 million acre-feet. California would receive 4.4 million acre-feet, Arizona 2.8 million acre-feet (though it would later sue California for more, winning its case before the Supreme Court in 1963), and Nevada 0.3 million acre-feet, leaving Mexico with 1.5 million acre-feet of virgin and return

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<sup>58</sup> John Stanley, "Arizona Explained: Parker Dam Almost Started War," *The Arizona Republic*, 15 July, 2013. Accessed online: <<http://archive.azcentral.com/travel/articles/20130708parker-dam-arizona-explained.html>>

water, as well as any surplus flow remaining after California and Arizona had taken their water.<sup>59</sup>

The importance of return flow might seem obscure at this point, as it perhaps did for Mexican negotiators. But it had enormous consequences. In short, the United States, particularly Arizona, signed the resulting treaty with Mexico in the belief that Mexico's share could be made up in part with drainage water from agriculture. Indeed, the entire compromise, and the plans for future water infrastructure that depended on it, hinged on that assumption. The language of the treaty reflected this: besides making no mention of water quality, the treaty stated that Mexico's share of water could come "from any and all sources" of the Colorado River, "whatever their origin."<sup>60</sup> Testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to ratify the treaty confirmed that this wording, and the omission of mention of quality, was expressly intended to allow the United States to deliver Mexico return water and allow for the higher salinity content it would bear.<sup>61</sup>

The resulting treaty for the "Utilization of Waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and of the Rio Grande," informally called the Mexico Waters Treaty in the United States and *el Tratado de Aguas* in Mexico, was signed in 1944.<sup>62</sup> It guaranteed Mexico 1.5 million acre-feet per year of Colorado River water but made no guarantee of water quality or source. The treaty also established a bi-national administrative body to oversee it, called the International

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<sup>59</sup> 500,000 acre-feet of Mexico's share would be delivered through the Pilot Knob Gate, a concession to California. Hundley Jr., *Dividing the Waters*, 132.

<sup>60</sup> *Utilization of Waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and of the Rio Grande*, February 3, 1944. Articles 10 and 11, pages 21 and 22. Viewable online at <<http://www.ibwc.state.gov/Files/1944Treaty.pdf>>.

<sup>61</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations, *Water Treaty with Mexico.: hearings before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Seventy-Ninth Congress, first session*. (Washington: U.S. Government Publications Office, 1945). See in particular the testimony of R.J. Tipton, who conceded that the Mexican Senate would likely not have accepted the treaty if wording had been added clarifying that Mexico had no right to water of a usable quality; pages 323-324 and 340-344.

<sup>62</sup> The Texas Archive of the Moving Image has made a video of the treaty's signing available on the Web: <[http://www.texasarchive.org/library/index.php/2011\\_03659](http://www.texasarchive.org/library/index.php/2011_03659)>.

Boundaries and Waters Commission (IBWC), or the *Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas* (CILA) in Mexico.<sup>63</sup> This body, an unusually collaborative one in the context of U.S.-Mexican relations, consists of a U.S. section and a Mexican section, the former under the authority of the Department of State and the latter the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. Together the two sections are tasked with scheduling and regulating deliveries of water in the Tijuana, Colorado, and Grande/Bravo basins, constructing and maintaining infrastructure, and regulating disputes. One of its first projects was the construction of Presa Morelos, a dam just south of the border that controlled the flow of water into the Álamo Canal and thus the Mexicali Valley.

After the treaty had been signed, Arizona finally ratified the Colorado River Compact, 22 years after it had first been negotiated.<sup>64</sup> The issue of return flows presented no immediate issue to Mexico, whose negotiators had been more concerned with securing as big a share of the river's water as possible. Disappointment that the amount was less than the desired 2 million acre-feet per year was mollified by the fact that Mexico had received far more than that volume every year for decades and could expect that to continue, since the United States did not yet have the infrastructure to capture more of the river's flow.

Following the signing of the treaty, the Mexicali Valley boomed. The Second World War boosted global demand for cotton, which spiked again in 1948 and then skyrocketed with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, its price increasing five-fold between 1950 and 1954. The simultaneous devaluation of the Mexican peso pushed up demand for Mexican cotton in the United States. Export agriculture was boosted by Cárdenas's extension of the

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<sup>63</sup> In the text, I will use IBWC when referring specifically to the U.S. section and CILA when referring specifically to the Mexican one. I will use IBWC-CILA when referring to both sections jointly. For more information, see < <http://www.ibwc.state.gov/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Hundley, *Dividing the Waters*, 135.

“*zona libre*” to all of northern Baja California, freeing inhabitants from import and export duties on consumer goods.<sup>65</sup> By 1955, Mexico was the world’s second-biggest producer of cotton.<sup>66</sup> The crop was Mexico’s most valuable export, and Mexicali was the country’s most productive and important cotton-growing region, having overtaken la Comarca Lagunera, an area bordered by Durango and Coahuila, the previous year.<sup>67</sup> Migrants poured into Mexicali from across Mexico, many of them arriving by the newly constructed railroad between Mexicali and Benjamín Hill, Sonora, inaugurated in 1948 and forming Baja California’s first terrestrial link with the rest of Mexico. Baja California’s population jumped from 78,907 in 1940 to 226,965 in 1950, with 124,362 in Mexicali alone.<sup>68</sup> Institutions of the Mexican state followed the cotton boom. In 1952, the territory of Baja California Norte was made Mexico’s 31<sup>st</sup> state. Its first governor, Braulio Maldonado, was elected the following year; in 1957 the state founded the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California and in 1958 established the first clinics of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social.<sup>69</sup>

This was Mexicali’s heyday, the era of *el oro blanco* – white gold. Abundant land and water, proximity to US markets, and the high price of cotton permitted the Valley to prosper as never before. Milton Castellanos Everardo, Governor of Baja California from 1971 to 1977, recalled the heady prosperity of the 50s in his memoir: “The measure of a Mexicali farmer’s worth was the car he drove, and it was a sign of failure if he wasn’t the owner of a

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<sup>65</sup> Cotton exports, however, continued to be subject to a special “ad-valorem” tax.

<sup>66</sup> Luis Aboites Aguilar, *El Norte Entre Algodones: Población, Trabajo Agrícola y Optimismo En México, 1930-1970* (Mexico, D.F.: El Colegio de Mexico, 2013), 323.

<sup>67</sup> Anguiano Téllez, *Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*, 167.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 169-173.

Cadillac or similar brand.”<sup>70</sup> Luxury cars like Cadillacs, Lincolns and Oldsmobiles could be seen parked under the mesquite trees on ejidos, and farmers showed off their shiny new tractors by holding races and tractor pull competitions. As a local turn of phrase had it, “you could sweep up money with a broom,” so prosperous were the times.<sup>71</sup> Farmers stopped planting corn, beans, tomatoes and even alfalfa, and turned their entire plots over to cotton cultivation. 31 cotton-ginning factories were built across the Valley, and the cottonseed processing facilities worked 24 hours a day. La Jabonera alone processed 200 tons of cottonseed a day, producing soap, oils, margarine, and cottonseed meal, a livestock feed made from leftover cottonseed husks.<sup>72</sup> Mexicali’s agribusiness complex and cross-border commerce boomed.

Yet the boom in cotton sowed the seeds of its own bust. The first problem to arise was lack of water. When the Waters Treaty was signed in 1944, engineers in the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos worried that the 1.5 million acre-feet it promised Mexicali would not be enough to irrigate the area already under cultivation at that time.<sup>73</sup> Their concerns were postponed, however, as each year Mexico continued to receive well over 2 million acre-feet, because infrastructure to divert or capture more water in the United States had not yet been constructed. In 1955, in preparation for the construction of Glen Canyon Dam, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation began storing more water than ever before, and Mexico received for the first time ever only the minimum treaty amount of 1.5 million acre-feet. The result was disastrous. Farmers had taken agricultural loans and planted cotton with the expectation that

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<sup>70</sup> Milton Castellanos Everardo, *Del Grijalva al Colorado: recuerdos y vivencias de un político* (Mexicali, B.C.: Secretaría de Educación Pública : Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1994), 365-366. This and all subsequent translations are my own.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Grijalva, “Agroindustria y Algodón En El Valle de Mexicali,” 12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Oscar Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola del valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C., México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1990), 179.

they would have the water to irrigate it. The diminished water supply meant they could only irrigate a fraction of their fields, and the rest of the crop was lost. The smaller crop sent a ripple through the Mexicali economy. Many farmers could not repay their loans and went bankrupt, or were forced to sell their land. Cotton companies had to write off the unpaid loans on their balance sheets and reduce their projected exports. Local businesses selling agricultural equipment and supplies lost sales. Agricultural day laborers went without work.<sup>74</sup>

The need to regulate the distribution of water fell upon the *Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado Número 014*, the Colorado River Irrigation District, Mexicali's water distribution authority. Institutionally, the Distrito was not powerful; the complex mosaic of water systems and agreements in the Mexicali Valley complicated its efforts to establish order and consistency. In spite of Cárdenas's expropriation of the Colorado River Land Company and its lands, much of the Valley's water infrastructure was owned and operated by the *Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas de Baja California*, which held a concession on the Álamo Canal lasting until 1961. The *Compañía*, to complicate matters, was owned by the Imperial Irrigation District (it had been founded by Guillermo Andrade and sold to Charles Rockwood; when his bankrupt company was nationalized and reorganized into the IID, the *Compañía*'s concession was transferred as well). Many of the various ranchos and colonias that had been established haphazardly since the governorship of Abelardo Rodríguez had their own distribution systems and agreements. The establishment of ejidos had created a new set of water users and irrigation agreements. The overlap between users, infrastructure

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<sup>74</sup> López Zamora, *El agua, la tierra*, 39.



systems, rights, and agreements created an extremely complex bureaucratic panorama for the Distrito, and diminished its ability to monitor and regulate water use.

Compounding the problem was an institutional disconnect between the Secretariats of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources in the administration of land and water. Prior to 1955, land had been distributed without taking the availability of water into consideration. Colonia and ejido creation took place haphazardly, without input from the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos. After the land had been sold or distributed, the Distrito de Riego would be given a request for irrigation water, but it had no say in how much land was actually distributed or prepared for cultivation. The implications of this lack of coordination for a region with only a few inches of rainfall a year, and a fixed annual flow of river water, are obvious.

In 1955, the Distrito de Riego undertook the creation of a *Padrón de Usuarios del Distrito de Riego* (Register of Users of the Irrigation District). The Padrón registered each farmer in the Mexicali Valley, regulated his or her share of water, and limited the release of more land for cultivation based on the availability of water. But this attempt at oversight was beset with problems. The Padrón would limit each farmer to an amount of water deemed sufficient to irrigate 20 Ha of cotton – the size of an ejido plot. Yet colonos and pequeños propietarios commonly owned plots of 100-150 Ha or more in area, and needed the water to irrigate it, or they would not be able to repay their agricultural loans.<sup>75</sup> Many ejidos had families in which each family member worked a 20 Ha plot, even though only the male head of the family was officially listed on the ejido charter. Those family members would not qualify for the Padrón, even though they too had fields to work and loans to repay. On the other hand, many ejidos did not have all of their lands under cultivation, and so did not need

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<sup>75</sup> Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola del valle de Mexicali*, 185.

all of their water. In the face of protests, the Distrito relented and allowed unregistered farmers to join the Padrón. These complications and exceptions weakened the attempt to regulate water use from the start.

Moreover, the Distrito's attempt to limit the demand for water was joined with efforts to increase the availability of water by digging wells. In 1955, with the permission of the SRH, the Asociación Algodonera began offering farmers loans to construct wells on their property. The following year, the SRH began its own smaller program of well construction. In 1957, the Asociación Algodonera began another program to construct wells that would irrigate the extra land on colonias above the 20 Ha amount provided by the Distrito de Riego. The results defied prudence – and hydrogeology. By the late 1950s, the same surface area of cotton was under cultivation as before the drop in water supply in 1955. The reduced flow from the river, whose regulation under the Padrón was already rife with exceptions, was now being supplemented by the completely unregulated pumping of underground water from hundreds of wells.<sup>76</sup> In addition to straining Mexicali's aquifer, the unequal distribution of access to well water exacerbated tensions between ejidatorios, who were limited to irrigating 20 Ha, and the colonos and pequeños propietarios who had wells and continued to irrigate hundreds of hectares of cotton.

The following year, 1956, the shortage of water was worsened when the United States government decided to sell the enormous stockpile of cotton it had accumulated under its cotton subsidy program. Undertaken partly to weaken the USSR and its ally Egypt, the “dumping” program shocked Mexico's cotton economy, which that year represented 35% of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 187.

Mexico's total exports and 20% of its foreign exchange.<sup>77</sup> To protect farmers and preserve the solvency of irrigation infrastructure (which was funded in part by the contributions of water users), the Mexican government reduced by one third the *ad valorem* tax charged on cotton exports, a policy that cost the government \$140 million pesos per year.<sup>78</sup> This helped to mitigate the economic shocks caused by dumping and the reduction in water, but also created a false incentive for farmers and investors to continue to seek profit from irrigated cotton in the face of declining hydrological and economic conditions. Indeed, the renowned historian of Mexico's water, Luis Aboites Aguilar, pinpoints 1955 as the apogee of Mexican cotton, and writes that "It is no surprise that from 1956 the conflicts, tensions, disagreements and disillusion [of cotton] multiplied in Mexico."<sup>79</sup>

Such conflict appeared in Mexicali in 1958, when a group of cotton farmers comprising both ejidatorios and colonos gathered to protest the price offered by the Valley's cotton buyers. They set up a protest encampment in front of the *Palacio de Gobierno* and coordinated a strike among cotton pickers at the height of the picking season, bringing the region's economy to a standstill and threatening the harvest. They demanded a higher price for cotton fiber and seed, a reduced fee for ginning, and reductions in taxes and the price of water. The protest compelled the Secretary of Agriculture, Gilberto Flores Muñoz, to travel to Mexicali to mediate, and eventually the federal government agreed to make up the difference in price between what the buyers offered and the farmers wanted, as well as to subsidize the cost of ginning.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Aboites, *El Norte Entre Algodones*, 330.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 322 and 331.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 335.

The strike helped to foster discontent with the Governor of Baja California, Braulio Maldonado Sánchez, one of the most polarizing figures in Mexicali history. A veteran of the Revolution, a protégé of Lázaro Cárdenas, and a committed Revolutionary ideologue, Maldonado's election as governor in 1953 had come as a surprise to many in Mexicali. His nationalism and fervor for expropriation made Mexicali's business community deeply mistrustful of him. Moreover, his election came at a moment when the opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) was in ascendancy in Baja California; the PAN capitalized on the cotton strike in 1958 to further criticize Maldonado. With the weight of the PRI machine behind him, Maldonado won by a landslide, but he was soon at odds with party higher-ups. "A rebel executive" who refused to heed the party orders, Maldonado's contempt for the state and national PRI leadership won him many enemies within his own party by the end of his term.<sup>81</sup> Rather than make alliances with local industry and politicians, Maldonado rallied the support of ejidatorios, day laborers, and other rural workers and frequently flouted the rule of law in his dealings. Ostensibly to combat narco-trafficking, he created a para-military force called *los Chemitas*.<sup>82</sup> But the group became Maldonado's private force of gunmen, intimidating opponents and killing journalists.<sup>83</sup>

Maldonado's internecine conflict with the PRI came to a head in 1958. That year, Maldonado sponsored the creation of an agrarian political organization called the *Liga Agraria Estatal* (State Agrarian League, LAE), headed by his ally Alfonso Garzón Santibáñez, an ejidatorio and long-time political organizer originally from the environs of Ensenada. The organization challenged the *Liga de Comunidades Agrarias* (League of

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<sup>81</sup> Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, "Prólogo," in Braulio Maldonado Sánchez, *Baja California: Comentarios Políticos* (Mexicali, B.C.: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1993), 23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> David A Shirk, *Mexico's New Politics: The PAN and Democratic Change* (Boulder, Colo.: L. Rienner, 2005), 66.

Agrarian Communities, LCA), the PRI-sponsored agrarian organization that formed part of the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (National Peasant Confederation, CNC).

Maldonado's LAE, which quickly grew larger and more influential than the LCA, enabled him to elude the tentacles of party pressure. When Adolfo López Mateos was named the PRI's candidate for president in 1958, Maldonado not only opposed him, but sponsored rallies for his opponent. When López Mateos visited Mexicali on the campaign trail, Maldonado organized large demonstrations to protest him. As a result, support for the PAN swelled in the lead-up to the election, and many PRIístas blamed Maldonado.<sup>84</sup>

Maldonado began to alienate not just industrialists and PRI higher-ups, but the rural-dwellers and poor who formed his base of political support. This too escalated in 1958, when the SRH attempted to evict thousands of squatters and settlers who had set up makeshift homes on the banks of the Tijuana River. Ostensibly, the squatters occupied land needed for infrastructure construction, but many believed Maldonado had illegally promised the land to a local business in exchange for kickbacks.<sup>85</sup> Enormous protests met the plan, and the local PAN leader Salvador Rosas Magallón began actively campaigning against it, swelling the ranks of the PAN in Tijuana. After months of increasing tensions, on December 30, 1958, Maldonado ordered the police to evict the squatters, leading to an outbreak of violence and the jailing of dozens of protesters, even as the eviction attempt failed.<sup>86</sup>

The tension escalated when the PAN nominated Rosas Magallón candidate for governor in the 1959 election. As the election day neared, Rosas's chances for victory grew, until his victory appeared not just possible but probable. Abruptly, Maldonado accused the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>85</sup> Shirk, *Mexico's New Politics*.

<sup>86</sup> León Portilla et al., *Baja California*, 173-174.

PAN of attempting to launch a rebellion, claiming PAN members had been found to have stockpiled arms. The police and army were called to “monitor” polls during the election, and serious irregularities in vote counting were reported. The PAN led huge protests claiming its voters had been intimidated and votes miscounted. The protests were violently repressed by the police, and Rosas Magallón and other PAN leaders were accused of *disolución social* and *asociación delictuosa* (social dissolution and criminal conspiracy), classic tools in the PRI’s oppressive repertoire.<sup>87</sup> The PRI claimed victory, and its candidate Eligio Esquivel (an engineer and former employee of the Distrito de Riego) took the governorship. Maldonado, left with no political allies in Baja California, moved to Michoacán. Esquivel went to great lengths to smooth relations with business leaders, the PRI, and PAN sympathizers, but Baja California’s political situation remained tense.

The context in which the salinity crisis began was thus politically and ecologically thorny. The transformation of the Colorado River’s landscape had enabled rapid development of the Lower Colorado delta and the conversion of thousands of hectares of desert into a prosperous agricultural area. Irrigation had also enabled a haphazard but inexorable process of *Mexicanización*: the takeover of the land and water of the region by the Revolutionary Mexican state and its colonization by Mexican citizens. Despite the advances of *Mexicanización*, however, the two countries remained closely connected by the movement of goods, people, and water.

The simmering nationalistic tension stirred by *Mexicanización*, moreover, hid the complex set of divisions within Mexicali society. Farmers in general resented the United States. Ejidatorios resented colonos and pequeños propietarios. The business community

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

resented – and feared – the ejidatorios of the *Liga Agraria Estatal*. The availability, albeit limited, of private agrarian credit outside the ejidal bank, meanwhile, helped the *Liga Agraria Estatal* and the PAN elude the coercion and co-optation of the PRI. All of these intertwined tensions had been both suppressed and sustained by the boom in cotton, which itself had only been maintained after 1955's water shortage by the ecologically unsustainable tapping of the Mexicali Valley's groundwater and by increasingly expensive government subsidies. By 1961, the region's stability and prosperity balanced on a knife's edge of Colorado River water. And that, thanks to developments upstream, was now under threat.

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The proximate cause of the salinity problem lay in the Wellton-Mohawk Valley in Arizona, some miles upstream from Mexicali east of Yuma along the Gila River, the Colorado's last main tributary. Like the Colorado River delta, the Gila River valley had seen a growing wave of settlement based on irrigated cotton agriculture since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1915, much of the Gila's flow had been tapped upstream, so Wellton-Mohawk farmers – who by the 1950s numbered around 300, plus their families, on around 70,000 hectares planted mostly in cotton – began increasingly to irrigate their fields with well water.

By the 1930s, however, many of the wells had become excessively saline. With each irrigation, water trickled down through the soil, dissolving and absorbing mineral content from the earth. It then rejoined the water table before being pumped up from a well, starting the salinizing process anew. By the 1940s, the Wellton-Mohawk region was in crisis, with many farms already abandoned and residents calling for help. It came in 1949, when the Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District, with help from the United States Bureau of Reclamation, initiated construction of a project to carry fresh water from the Colorado

River to the Wellton-Mohawk Valley. The project was completed in 1952 and the torrent of fresh water briefly rejuvenated the Wellton-Mohawk Valley.

Unfortunately, the diversion project was undertaken without any study of the Wellton-Mohawk Valley's capacity for drainage. As a result, the vast quantity of fresh water began to accumulate in the soil, raising the water table until it lay just a few feet from the surface and, in some areas, in swampy pools above the surface. Groundwater in the root zone is fatal for many crops anyway, but making the situation worse was the buildup of salinity from the previous decades of repeated irrigation with well water. The capillary effect drew the dissolved salts up to the surface, killing plants and poisoning the soil. By 1959, a large proportion of the region's fields were waterlogged or threatened by it.

Once again, Wellton-Mohawk farmers clamored for help, and the Bureau of Reclamation delivered. In an add-on to the diversion project, the Bureau sank dozens of wells across the Wellton-Mohawk Valley and affixed them with high-capacity pumps. These wells drew water from deep underground, lowering the water table away from the surface and thus permitting irrigation water to safely drain down through the root zone.

However, the Bureau of Reclamation had more in mind for the Wellton-Mohawk Project than just draining the top few feet of soil. But Bureau officials preferred not to speak too openly about this second purpose, given the competition for Colorado River water. The purpose was to "wash" the Wellton-Mohawk Valley's soils of their salt content and create an underground reservoir of freshwater from the Colorado River. Over time, as fresh water was poured onto the surface and saline water pumped from underground, the dissolved minerals lying in the soils and groundwater would gradually be leached out. The now-fresh water in the ground could then be used for irrigation. Wellton-Mohawk would then have not only the



water diverted from the river, but an underground store to be tapped when needed. Even better, this underground reservoir would be impervious to evaporation, the main scourge of surface water storage in the arid Southwest, where annual evaporation from Lake Mead, the reservoir formed by Hoover Dam, alone is around 800,000 acre-feet per year. The wells in Wellton-Mohawk served a double purpose: compensating for the region's poor natural drainage, and providing Arizona with a bonus of fresh Colorado River water for the future, separate from its annual share.

One problem remained: what to do with the highly saline groundwater pumped up from the wells. In some wells the water was almost as salty as the sea; on average it had salinity at around 6000 parts per million.<sup>88</sup> A network of canals collected this water from the network of wells and conveyed it into the Gila's dry riverbed. But when the saline water began to percolate into Yuma's groundwater, the Bureau extended the main outlet canal to the mouth of the Gila on the Colorado River, just a few miles upstream from Mexico.

The Bureau's engineers hoped that the volume of water in the Colorado River would be sufficiently high to dilute the saline groundwater to a level safe for agriculture and consumption. But they also rested secure in the knowledge that the Colorado River Compact and the 1944 Treaty permitted Arizona to deliver Mexico water no matter what its origin or quality. When the canal was completed at the beginning of the summer of 1961, the river's flow was indeed sufficient to dilute the salt. After all, Mexico requested that the vast majority of its annual share be delivered during the summer months to coincide with the cotton crop. At the end of the summer, however, Mexico's flow of water was reduced to a minimum. The

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<sup>88</sup> Letter from Ralph Dungan to Mr. Katzenbach, Deputy Attorney General, 26 April 1963. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (JFK), White House Staff Files, Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62-6/16/63.

flow of saline water from Wellton-Mohawk was not reduced, and so the salinity of Mexico's river water leapt from around 750 parts per million to over 2500 parts per million. Farmers watched perplexed as the winter alfalfa crop withered from the invisible poison it had been irrigated with. The salinity crisis had begun.

**Chapter Two**  
**From Salinity to Crisis: Mexican Politics, Salt, and the Cuban Revolution**



*Photo: John F. Kennedy met by cheering crowds in Mexico City, June 29, 1962. Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Online Photographic Collection, Accession #ST-300-38-62.*

When U.S. President John F. Kennedy traveled to Mexico City in June of 1962, the welcome shown by Mexicans stunned his administration. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April, the White House was braced for a frosty reception and angry crowds. Instead, Mexico City's people gave an outpouring of enthusiasm and affection for Kennedy that had never been seen before in Mexico. The U.S. embassy in Mexico reported that a "dictionary of superlatives would be necessary to describe fully the public and press reaction to the visit to Mexico on June 29 to July 1, 1962, of President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy." The Mexican

government was known to flatter visiting dignitaries by staging crowds with banners of welcome at the airport. But even the Mexican government was amazed at the huge throngs that welcomed the Kennedys with heartfelt enthusiasm. As the embassy reported, “Nobody could have foretold... the enormous crowds that assembled spontaneously at all possible points of vantage for a glimpse of the presidential entourage.”<sup>1</sup> The embassy estimated that one and a half million people had come to greet the Kennedys as they drove from the airport to the *zócalo*. Even *Siempre!*, a critical leftist publication that pushed the boundaries of the state’s press censorship, gave the visit extensive coverage with a favorable editorial slant. Per the embassy, “Mexicans say that never in Mexico’s history has any event of what might be termed an outside nature produced such overwhelming popular enthusiasm or such enormous newspaper and magazine coverage. The reception of the Kennedys was unprecedented.”<sup>2</sup>

The tone was more aloof and serious, however, in the discussions between Kennedy and his Mexican counterpart, President Adolfo López Mateos. Both presidents faced what they considered fundamental challenges to their country’s and government’s security, and both believed the other held the key to their own problem. For López Mateos, it was the problem of salinity in the Colorado River, and the diplomatic negotiations to resolve it, which had become deadlocked over the interpretation of the 1944 Waters Treaty. For Kennedy, it was the international reverberations of the Cuban Revolution and its enduring appeal to opponents of the United States, which his brainchild the Alliance for Progress was designed to defuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Airgram, U.S. Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, 13 September 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, General 7/62 – 10/62 and undated, Documents 15 and 15b.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The connection between the two issues – already forming in the months before June – became solidified at the summit. Even as the United States had taken escalating measures to isolate and sanction Cuba, the Revolution had unleashed a wave of popular support within Mexico. The movement for support for Cuba soon birthed calls for political reform within Mexico. To undercut this movement and maintain its own Revolutionary legitimacy, the Mexican government found itself compelled to adopt a more sympathetic relationship with Cuba than the United States preferred.

The salinity crisis emerged at the same time as this reform movement and showed signs of adding to its momentum. Those inspired by Cuba to seek reform in Mexico found in the salinity problem the embodiment in miniature of their country's ills: a corrupt, ineffectual government, unwilling to stand up to the United States and disinterested in the plight of rural Mexico. Mexicalenses whose livelihoods were affected by the salinity had more immediate reasons for anger, and began to demonstrate en masse.

At the summit, the Mexican government positioned the salinity problem as the fulcrum of its relations with Cuba and the United States. Mexico's allegiance in the Cold War – its cooperation in the Alliance for Progress and its willingness to isolate Cuba – would require the United States to put an end to the salinity problem. By the time Kennedy returned to the United States, salinity had leapt to the fore of Mexican domestic politics and its relations with the United States in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. Mexico's Cold War had become a war over salt and water.

This chapter traces the two chains of events that converged at the summit. First it explores the response to the salinity problem within Mexico, and the ways the salinity problem exacerbated class-based and political tensions within the Mexicali Valley and began

to feed into a broader national movement that called for political reforms by comparing Mexico's Revolutionary stagnation to Cuba's Revolutionary dynamism. Next, it examines the initial diplomatic response to the salinity problem between Mexico and the United States, which deadlocked over the two countries' differing interpretations of the 1944 Waters Treaty, interpretations which stemmed from the different histories of water use and political development in each country. Finally, it shows how the Mexican government attempted to solve the latter problem by linking it with the former, a maneuver completed at the June 1962 presidential summit.

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On the very last day of 1961, Alfonso Garzón Santibáñez joined thousands of his fellow Mexicalenses in the largest demonstration in the city's history. The leader of the *Liga Agraria Estatal*, (State Agrarian League, LAE) the Mexicali Valley's largest farmers' association, Garzón led a delegation of thousands of ejidatorios and colonos and their families carrying banners in a march down Mexicali's main street along with throngs of students, labor union members, politicians, and shopkeepers, representing all of what the region's military commander called the "*fuerzas vivas*" (literally "live forces;" social classes, civil society organizations, "the powers that be") of Mexicali, some 12,000-15,000 people.<sup>3</sup> The rally's cause: the recent U.S.-caused surge in the salinity of the Colorado River.

The march was only the latest and largest of a number of intensifying demonstrations over the previous two months since the salinity had first been discovered. In the two weeks leading up to the march, Mexicali's business community had united in a boycott of the stores, businesses, and agricultural suppliers of Calexico, the city across the street and across the

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<sup>3</sup> Report, Miguel Hernández Palacios, 3 January 1962. Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (henceforth SRE), Fondo Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (henceforth CILA), Folder C-132-5, Folio 5.

border from Mexicali, where Mexicalenses normally bought many of their daily basics as well as agricultural equipment, fertilizer, seed, and supplies. At the same time the boycott began, Valley farmers had announced that they would abandon the planting of 47,000 hectares of winter wheat and alfalfa, and established a round-the-clock protest encampment in front of the U.S. consulate. Every union, student group, business association, civil society organization, newspaper editorial board, and agricultural society in the region had thrown its support into the effort to protest the salty water that had been discovered in the Colorado River barely two months before.

That day the thousands of marchers slowly congregated in front of the *Palacio de Gobierno* (Government Palace), in plain view of the U.S. consulate just a block away. Joining the Governor of Baja California, Eligio Esquivel, and other local leaders, Garzón climbed to the balcony of the Palacio and gave a speech denouncing the United States for the salty water it was pouring into the Colorado River just upstream from the border. To cheers from the crowd, Garzón and Esquivel described how the saline water was harming the health of Mexicalenses and destroying the rich agricultural lands of the Valley, and called on the United States to put an end to it immediately.

Following the speeches, Garzón led the LAE members down the street to the consulate, where he declared that they would remain with the encampment until the United States began sending good quality water into the river again. That might be, he hoped, as soon as the next day. The crowds began to disperse, leaving only the tents and cooking fires of the encampment in the dying light of the winter day, but the city buzzed with talk of salinity, the United States, and the protest. The march had been carried out in complete peace and order, the military commander reported, with none of the speakers so much as resorting

to offensive language, and with a demonstration of remarkable unity among all of the social classes and political groups of Mexicali.<sup>4</sup>

The salinity problem, of course, did not end the next day. Moreover, the seeming harmony between social groups displayed at the march belied growing tensions among Mexicalenses rooted in the valley's political and social context and intensified by the rise of salinity. The problems exacerbated frictions between Mexicali's cotton business interests and PRI-affiliated farmers, and the *Liga Agraria Estatal*, which typically was highly critical of U.S. economic involvement in Mexicali and the PRI's tolerance of it. While leery of Garzón and the LAE, the PRI and the cotton industry needed the group's organizing prowess to gain publicity for the salinity problem. They watched nervously as Garzón used the salinity problem as a platform for ever more radical and critical activism that increasingly attacked the PRI, for its inability to resolve the salt problem, as the United States, for causing it.

Even more alarmingly for the PRI, the protests over salinity emerged at the same time that a new movement for political reform, inspired partly by the Cuban Revolution, burst onto the scene. The movement used Cuba to reflect on the course of Mexico's own Revolution as an oblique criticism of the PRI. The salinity problem seemed to be the perfect symbolic issue for this movement, and the government greatly feared the potential for Mexicali's salt problem to fuel a more direct leftist challenge to the ruling party.

At the same time, however, the broader Cold War discourse that the pro-Cuba movement engaged with also served the PRI's interests in pressuring the United States to resolve the salinity problem. Mexican protesters and government officials alike could hold the United States to its own self-proclaimed values of freedom, fairness, and respect for

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



sovereignty, which evidently clashed with its treatment of Mexicali. Moreover, the protests in Mexicali and the pro-Cuba movement, while worrying to the PRI, also concerned the United States, which feared the growth of pro-Communist sentiment so close to its border. Thus, by the time of Kennedy's visit to Mexico City, the salinity problem had become a Cold War problem connecting local, national, and international Mexican politics.

As diplomatic negotiations deadlocked over the winter (detailed below), protests in Mexicali grew in size, frequency and intensity. In January, Mexicalenses formed a protest-coordinating group called the *Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali Valley Defense Committee). What made the Comité de Defensa unique was the broad diversity of interests and political beliefs that it united. Funding and much of the group's leadership was provided by the *Asociación Algodonera del Valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali Valley Cotton Association), a business trade group representing the interests of the Valley's cotton enterprises, the mostly American companies that extended most agricultural loans to farmers, bought their crops, and processed, packed and exported the raw fiber and seed in the Valley's multiple factories. The Asociación Algodonera thus represented both the financial and business elite of the Valley as well as – to a certain extent – U.S. influence and interests. The Comité de Defensa also grouped together high school and university students, labor unions like the powerful *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (National Syndicate of Education Workers, SNTE), and all of the region's agrarian organizations: Alfonso Garzón's Liga Agraria Estatal, the CNC-affiliated *Liga de Comunidades Agrarias* (League of Agrarian Communities, LCA), and the *Unión Agrícola Regional* (Regional Agricultural Union, UAR), a small but influential group mostly made up of colonos, as opposed to the mostly ejidatorio membership of the other two groups.

The Committee's unified front masked fundamental political differences and, at times, deep mistrust between its constituent groups. This tension pivoted around Alfonso Garzón and the Liga Agraria Estatal. The Liga had been founded in 1958 by Alfonso Garzón with the blessing of the governor of Baja California at the time, Braulio Maldonado, a divisive figure in Baja California history. Maldonado had been a close ally of Lázaro Cárdenas and enjoyed affection and respect from the Valley's ejidatorios. "I have never known a better orator than Braulio with humble folks [*pequeños grupos humildes*]", remembered Milton Castellanos Everardo, who served on Maldonado's electoral campaign as President of the PRI Regional Committee in 1952 (though he later distanced himself politically from Maldonado), and was governor of the state from 1971 to 1977.<sup>5</sup> But Maldonado had earned loathing from the business community for his erratic socialist pronunciations, and from Mexicalenses of all stripes for his corruption and violence. Furthermore, he had made enemies within the PRI structure, frequently ignoring directions from Mexico City and publicly criticizing other party members. He had founded the Liga Agraria to challenge the power of the PRI-affiliated Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, and it soon represented the majority of the ejidatorios of Mexicali.

When the politically-isolated Maldonado left Baja California for Michoacán at the end of his term, Garzón took his place as the Valley's most outspoken *campesino* advocate and critic of PRI agrarian policy. Born August 4, 1920, on the Ejido El Salto in the municipality of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Garzón had a long career of rural organizing and political leadership. A full ejidatorio member of El Salto at the age of sixteen, by seventeen he became Secretary of El Salto's ejidal commission and joined the CNC the following year. He

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<sup>5</sup> Milton Castellanos Everardo, *Del Grijalva al Colorado: recuerdos y vivencias de un político* (Mexicali, B.C.: Secretaría de Educación Pública : Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1994), 160.

served as the *Jefe de Defensa Social* (Chief of Social Defense) and *Jefe de Trabajo* (Chief of Labor) of Ejido El Salto from 1942 to 1942, and then moved to Ensenada in 1943 to serve as the *Secretario de Acción Campesina* (Secretary of Campesino Action) for the PRI local committee. In 1952, he became *Diputado Suplente* (Alternate Deputy, meaning he would take the Deputy's role should the Deputy become unable to execute his or her role, such as due to an accident) for the PRI to the Baja California state congress, representing the 7<sup>th</sup> District of Mexicali, and served as the *Secretario de Colonización* (Secretary of Colonization) for the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos until 1955. After forming the LAE in 1958, he still enjoyed enough popular support in the Valley to be named the *Diputado Federal Suplente* (Alternate Federal Deputy) for the PRI in 1961.<sup>6</sup>

Garzón was a big, burly man. He often dressed in *agricultor* garb of cowboy boots and hat, jeans, white shirt and brown leather jacket. His sunburned face featured a heavy creased brow, round nose, substantial mustache, and a wide, easy-going grin. Farmers related to him: he had ejido roots, long experience in rural politics and organizing, and, like many in the Mexicali Valley, was a migrant to the state. He was a rousing and inspiring speaker, a tireless worker, and had a survivor's political instinct and nose for opportunity. He played his cards boldly. He could also be ruthless, had the populist's shameless ability to reverse his opinions and allegiances, and put personal control of his organization over democratic representation. He was a controversial figure, but he did achieve results. The Liga Agraria Estatal, as a result, was the most popular and powerful farmers' organization in the Mexicali Valley.

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<sup>6</sup> Report: "Central Campesina Independiente," Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, 18 January 1967. AGN, Galería 1, DFS, File 11-136-67, Bundle 16, Folio 1.

The Liga served its members in a number of ways. The group provided a social community for farmers in far-flung parts of the Valley, a way to meet, socialize, trade knowledge about agriculture and discuss issues related to farming in the Valley's sun-scorched soil. Members frequently gathered at one ejido or another simply to socialize and enjoy *barbacoa*. Politically, the group lobbied in the interests of farmers and landless workers seeking an ejido plot. They organized to demand better access and terms of credit, lower prices for irrigation water, and higher prices for cotton. They frequently resorted to direct action, such as demonstrations, marches, turning up en masse at the Palacio de Gobierno, or, in extreme cases, setting up permanent encampments in public spaces (known today as a *plantón*, a classic tool in the Mexican activist repertoire).

Rhetorically, the Liga and Garzón drew on tropes of the Mexican Revolution to point out the contrast between the revolution's promises and its results. Rare was their speech, demonstration, letter, or pamphlet that did not call for *reforma agraria integral* (complete agrarian reform, meaning not just the distribution of land but the creation of institutions to support ejidal agriculture) and that did not reference the 1917 Constitution or Lázaro Cárdenas. Indeed the group's letterhead featured a seal depicting Emiliano Zapata holding a rifle and the slogan *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Freedom).

The Mexicali Valley proved fertile ground for highlighting the difference between Revolutionary expectations and outcomes. On the one hand, it had a large population that had benefitted from land redistribution to form the group's membership. On the other hand, U.S. businesses continued to dominate overwhelmingly the region's economy. Many farmers remained without land or access to water. Moreover, the disparity between ejido farmers, with 20 hectares each, and colonos, with up to 200 hectares each, provided a constant

reminder that ejidatorios were treated unfairly. The Liga thus criticized many of the established powers of the Valley: the U.S. corporations that dominated its economy, the government for not living up to its Revolutionary promises, and its affiliated groups, like the CNC, for adopting the party line at the expense of their members' interests.

The salinity problem exacerbated these tensions, even as it created common cause among the social classes and political groups within the Valley. For while the rise in salinity had a negative effect on Mexicali's inhabitants entirely, it did not have a negative effect equally. It affected some farmers more than others, and these inequities often divided along lines of class and political affiliation. The hardest hit were ejidatorios without access to well water on poorly-drained soils. Being completely dependent on surface water, they did not have the ability to turn to higher-quality groundwater when the river's mineral content rose. The close soils caused minerals to accumulate in the ground, making their plots less productive. And because ejidatorios could only irrigate 20 hectares of land (and could not use their land as collateral to secure loans), they had less access to the financial resources that helped to mitigate salinity by, for example, increasing fertilizer use, planting other crops, reducing acreage to concentrate irrigation water to flush minerals through the soil, and so on. Colonos and pequeños propietarios, by contrast, generally fared better under the effects of salinity. With larger plots of 200 hectares, in some cases more, they were generally more prosperous; owning the land gave them important collateral for financing plot improvements, purchasing fertilizer, equipment, better seeds, or diversifying crops. Most importantly, many owned private wells. When the salinity of surface increased, they could increase their groundwater pumping to supplement or replace the supply of surface water. Since groundwater had much lower salinity than surface water (a disparity which decreased over

the course of the 1960s), they could essentially void the effects of the salinity increase completely. In between these two poles were others, both colonos and ejidatorios, who felt both negative effects of salinity and some mitigating circumstances: looser, better-draining soils, for example, or access to groundwater from the Distrito de Riego's system of public wells.

A third group was comprised of the non-farmers whose livelihoods depended nonetheless on cotton agriculture. This included mid-level businesspeople who sold farm equipment, seeds, fertilizers, and the like; cotton company executives and financiers; and industrial foremen who managed workers in the Valley's cotton-processing factories. Their profits depended on the ability of farmers to grow cotton, sell it, and purchase the items necessary to grow it again. The problem of salinity thus presented a serious threat to this group, but their economic orientation and political views tended to shun the sort of radical, redistribution-oriented political platform of the Liga Agraria Estatal.

The politico-economic disparity of the effects of salinity was not immediately apparent in the first months of the problem's existence, but it became increasingly important over the years to come. The salinity became a problem not only because it harmed Mexicali agriculture, but because it exacerbated the political and social tensions that underpinned Mexicali agrarian society, tensions arising from the history of the Valley's development and the Cardenista land reform that had transformed it. Those most negatively affected by the salinity problem were the ejidatorios who supported the Liga Agraria Estatal and a policy of radical land reform, including expropriation of privately held lands and the nationalization of the cotton processing industry. Those less affected were more likely to be private landowners themselves, businesspeople engaged in agricultural commerce, or involved in the cotton

industry. Likewise, they supported the PRI, or even the opposition *Partido Acción Nacional*, and favored a moderate agrarian policy.

Thus while the Comité de Defensa ostensibly presented a united front, the presence of Alfonso Garzón and the Liga Agraria Estatal on the committee produced tension. PRI and CNC members resented Garzón, while the business community represented in the Asociación Algodonera considered him and the Liga an enemy of free enterprise and an existential threat. But the Comité de Defensa could not afford to exclude the LAE and its protest-ready membership. As Milton Castellanos later put it, “it would be absurd to try to hide the fact that at that time, the Liga Agraria Estatal had an absolute majority in the Mexicali Valley.”<sup>7</sup> For better or for worse, the Comité de Defensa needed the mobilizing power and the membership strength of the Liga Agraria Estatal, which were essential to the protests and demonstrations that drew attention to the salinity problem.

Garzón and the Liga delivered in this respect. A number of marches in November and December culminated in the massive New Year’s Eve demonstration described above, after which the Comité was officially established. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, Garzón set off for Mexico City at the head of a motor caravan representing the Comité de Defensa, *el Comité Coordinador de la Iniciativa Privada* (the Private Initiative Coordinating Committee, a group uniting Mexicali business owners), and farmers from 58 ejidos, 16 colonias, and 26 land-seeking groups. This *Caravana de la Sal* (Caravan of Salt) would publicize the salt problem in every town it passed through on the way to the capital, where Garzón and others would attempt to meet with the ministers of foreign relations and hydraulic resources, hold demonstrations,

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<sup>7</sup> Castellanos Everardo, *Del Grijalva al Colorado*, 220.

and try to get on television.<sup>8</sup> The motorcade comprised 50 cars and two buses, and reached Mexico City on the 12<sup>th</sup>. The protesters held a demonstration in the *Plaza de la Constitución*, and met with Humberto Romero, President López Mateos's personal secretary, and Manuel Tello, the Minister of Foreign Relations. To their frustration and disgust, the president would not meet with them.<sup>9</sup>

Back in Mexicali, protests continued as well. In March, the Distrito de Riego announced a reduction in farmers' irrigation rights, from 20 Ha to 14 Ha. Because of the increased salinity of the Colorado River, the Distrito had had to request extra water from the United States, which would reduce its allotment for later in the summer. With less water to go around, farmers would have to irrigate a smaller area.<sup>10</sup> Yet when it became apparent that farmers who owned wells, such as many colonos and pequeños propietarios, could continue to irrigate above the newly-imposed limit using groundwater, Alfonso Garzón and the Liga Agraria Estatal mounted swift protests. Arguing that the Constitution made underground waters the property of the nation, Garzón demanded that water from privately-owned wells be distributed to ejidatorios to fulfill their 20 Ha of irrigation, before being put to private use. Private well owners agreed to supply water to ejidatorios, as long as they paid for it, and the Liga Agraria agreed to a compromise to limit irrigation to 18 Ha.<sup>11</sup> The episode fueled anger against the Distrito de Riego, and the agrarian organizations began to circulate a petition calling for the firing of local functionaries, for their lackluster response to the salinity problem: most prominently, Oscar González Lugo, the manager of the Distrito de Riego, as

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum of telephone conversation, 7 February 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-3, Folio 61.

<sup>9</sup> DFS Report, 20 February 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 7, Folio 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Asunto Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, Mexicali, B.C. - Cuotas de Agua" Dirección General de Distritos de Riego, SRH. AGN, Galería 2, Box 2957B, File 34.

<sup>11</sup> Evan R Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 82-83.



well as members of the *Banco Agrícola* and the *Banco Ejidal* (Agricultural Bank and Ejidal Bank, the state-level and national agricultural lenders), calling them “traitors to the Patria” for their inaction as salt threatened the Valley.<sup>12</sup> All the while, protests directed at the United States continued. The Comité de Defensa organized a boycott against Calxico, where they claimed Mexicalenses shopped to the tune of 74 million dollars per year. Upon returning from Mexico City, where the Caravan of Salt had been a success, Alfonso Garzón began a campaign to collect 30,000 passports from Mexicali residents to send in protest to President Kennedy.<sup>13</sup>

Authorities watched closely – and nervously. In a letter to President López Mateos, Ambassador Carrillo Flores warned the president that the situation in Mexicali had become increasingly “distressed” [*angustiada*] and had become even more serious now that the caravan had reached Mexico City, bringing national awareness to the salt issue. The “problem has taken on a political character,” Carrillo wrote.<sup>14</sup> Most worryingly of all, the salinity problem appeared poised to become embroiled with a broader political movement that drew upon the symbolism of the Cuban Revolution to demand reform of Mexico’s ruling party.

The Cuban Revolution electrified Mexico. Mexicans, like many others in Latin America and around the world, thrilled to the extraordinary story of the revolutionaries’ triumph against unlikely odds, their swaggering charisma, and to the sense of optimism and imminent change that the Revolution contributed to an already potent global era of de-colonialism. Moreover, as Kate Doyle has written, the Revolution shocked Mexico’s political

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<sup>12</sup> “Airada petición de cese para 4 funcionarios,” *El Mexicano*, 5 March 1962.

<sup>13</sup> “En Mexicali deciden no comprar en EE. UU.” *La Prensa*, 7 March 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Carrillo Flores to López Mateos, 17 February 1962. SRE, CILA, C-132-6, Folios 57-62.

system by providing a new rallying cause for leftists dissatisfied with the rule of the PRI.<sup>15</sup> As the Cuban Revolution triumphed and consolidated, it energized leftist Mexicans of various political affiliations. They led demonstrations and rallies to show support for Cuba, circulated pamphlets that praised the Revolution and its achievements, and held meetings to discuss Marxism and world politics. The failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs only increased Mexican sympathy for Cuba, and caused an outburst of public support for Cuba and denunciations of the United States.

Mexicans rallied in support of Cuba for various reasons. Some did so out of a sense of left-wing or Marxist solidarity, some from similar feelings of pan-Latin American unity, and some out of the anti-U.S. strain that runs deep within Mexican nationalism. But the main reason that the Cuban Revolution resonated had more to do with Mexico than with Cuba itself. As Eric Zolov has written, the Cuban Revolution made an impact on Mexico precisely because it provided a rhetorical opening for the discussion of Mexico's own revolution and its ideological course. Protests against the U.S. after the Bay of Pigs, such as the sacking of the *Instituto Cultural Mexicano-Norteamericano* (North American-Mexican Cultural Institute) in Morelia that Zolov analyzed, "reflected the release of mounting social and ideological tensions brewing within Mexican society... The Cuban revolution exacerbated and ultimately helped crystallize those ideological tensions, though it by no means 'caused

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<sup>15</sup> Kate Doyle, "After the Revolution: Lázaro Cárdenas and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional," *The National Security Archive*, May 31, 2004, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB124/>. This article first sparked my curiosity in the salinity crisis. The National Security Archive is a unique non-profit organization dedicated to promoting accessibility to information and checking government secrecy by obtaining and disseminating classified government documents, primarily through Freedom of Information requests – it has filed more than 50,000 since its founding in 1985. Documents are then published on its website and in a digital archive. On Cuba-Mexico relations, see also Kate Doyle, "Double Dealing: Mexico's Foreign Policy Toward Cuba," *The National Security Archive*, March 2, 2003, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB83/index.htm>; for earlier interpretations of the Cuban-Mexican relationship, see Christopher M White, *Creating a Third World: Mexico, Cuba, and the United States During the Castro Era* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Olga Pellicer de Brody, *México y la revolución cubana*. (México: El Colegio de México, 1972).

them' as many observers in the United States would later charge."<sup>16</sup> The Cuban Revolution, in short, provided a vivid backdrop against which to discuss Mexico's own Revolution and the state's failure, in many cases, to fulfill the Revolution's promises.

By this time, many Mexicans had begun to feel ambivalent about the course of Mexico's development and the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Since the Second World War, key revolutionary programs like agrarian reform had slowed or stopped and the Mexican government had taken a more conservative approach that emphasized import-substitution industrialization and economic growth over land redistribution and social programs. The results were mixed. For example, the urban-dwelling middle class swelled in size and found wider avenues to social mobility in industrial employment and in the ranks of the government bureaucracy.<sup>17</sup> Mexico posted consistently high economic growth through the 1940s and 1950s, which some began to call the "Mexican Miracle".

Yet economic growth masked problems. Mexico's authoritarian system depended on rent-seeking arrangements that skewed its economy and stifled government accountability.<sup>18</sup> While the prospects of the middle class and some sections of the working class improved, the poorest of the poor and rural-dwellers fell on harder times. Their real incomes dropped, and they faced growing government neglect. With ejidal agriculture weakened by lack of credit, small plots, and weak internal markets, more and more rural-dwellers sought wage work in cities or tried their luck across the U.S. border, many through the Bracero program initiated in 1942.

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Zolov, "¡Cuba Sí, Yanquis No! The Sacking of the Instituto Cultural Mexico-Norteamericano in Morelia, Michoacán, 1961", in *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham, 2008), 214.

<sup>17</sup> Roger D. Hansen, *The Politics of Mexican Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen H Haber, *Mexico Since 1980* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Discontent grew even among the urban middle class whose support the government relied on. The post-war baby boom, newfound social mobility, and greater integration into North American consumer culture and youth culture networks had raised expectations among urban workers and the middle class above the economy's capacity to fulfill them.<sup>19</sup> The unrest became apparent in 1958 when a railroad workers' strike in Mexico City spread rapidly, finding widespread support. After acceding to its demands, the government violently repressed the strike when its leaders pressed for more; many remained in jail by the early 1960s and represented a stain on the government's legitimacy.<sup>20</sup>

The Cuban Revolution brought this discontent to the fore and compelled some Mexicans to question the direction of Mexico's own Revolution. Indeed, with its armed phase long since over and many of its programs of social change stalled or abandoned, the Revolution continued to exist mostly as a set of national symbols, guiding principles, claims to legitimacy, and rhetoric. For reformers and opponents of the PRI, Cuba provided an example of Revolutionary dynamism that highlighted the ruling party's failures. The PRI, for itself, found itself in an awkward place: unwilling to endorse Castro and the Revolution's decisive socialist turn, but unable, because of its own claims to revolutionary legitimacy, to outwardly denounce Cuba. Popular demonstrations of support for Cuba thus deeply worried the regime, which recognized that voices in favor of Cuba were implicitly voices against the PRI.

Most worryingly for the regime, the strongest voice in support of Cuba belonged to Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, the former president of Mexico (1934-1940) and the last who was also a Revolutionary general. Cárdenas holds a unique place in Mexican history. He is

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis*.

<sup>20</sup> Robert F Alegre, *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory*, 2013.

beloved to this day by Mexicans of many political stripes, remembered for his approachable humility, his attention to the causes and interests of workers and peasants, his acceleration of agrarian reform, and, perhaps most of all, the 1938 decree nationalizing Mexico's oil and the expropriation of U.S. and British oil facilities. He remains arguably Mexico's most popular president to this day.

But Cárdenas's legacy is mixed. His populism elides the fact that his consolidation of the ruling party (which he renamed *Partido Revolucionario Mexicano* from *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*; following his sexenio it was renamed to the PRI) created many of the foundations for the subsequent decades of PRI authoritarian rule. Cárdenas greatly increased the size of the government bureaucracy and state institutions. Most importantly, he incorporated workers' and peasants' movements into the ruling party with the creation of the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* and the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (National Peasant Confederation, CNC, and Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM).<sup>21</sup> While these organizations created institutional space for workers and peasants within the government, they also became vehicles for corruption, co-optation, and *charrismo* ("bought" unions). Union leaders made sweetheart deals with the regime and toed the party line; workers or shop-floor leaders who dissented found themselves ostracized and blocked out of leadership roles, contracts, or jobs.

Nonetheless, in 1961 Cárdenas enjoyed enormous popularity and was not associated in the public mind with the regime's corruption. After the Cuban Revolution, Cárdenas had re-emerged from several decades out of the political limelight as a strong voice in favor of Cuba. As Renata Keller has pointed out, Cárdenas had played a personal part in the success

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<sup>21</sup> Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

of the Revolution: when Mexican police arrested Fidel Castro, Ernesto Guevara, and other future revolutionaries in 1956, Cárdenas convinced President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines to release them. When the triumphant revolutionaries celebrated the anniversary of the attack on the Moncada barracks in 1959, Cárdenas traveled to Havana to join them, giving a speech in front of thousands and asking the world to support Cuba.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Cárdenas had become one of the most prominent and vocal supporters of Cuba, not just in Mexico but around the world.

In March of 1961, Cárdenas presided over the *Conferencia Latinoamericana por la soberanía nacional, la emancipación económica, y la paz* (Latin American Conference for National Sovereignty, Economic Emancipation, and Peace) in Mexico City along with Domingo Vellasco of Brazil and Alberto T. Casella of Argentina.<sup>23</sup> According to Keller, the conference “was among the most important international efforts to harness the momentum of the Cuban Revolution and extend its perceived achievements throughout Latin America.”<sup>24</sup> Attendance at the conference fluctuated between 2,000 and 10,000 people; speakers included Vicente Lombardo Toledano of the *Partido Popular Socialista* (Popular Socialist Party, PPS, a Mexican left-wing nationalist party that generally supported PRI policy) and Vilma Espín, the Cuban revolutionary who had married Raúl Castro in 1959 and founded the Federation of Cuban Women in 1960 (and headed it for the next four decades).

Speeches at the *Conferencia Pro-Paz*, as it became known, spoke to a common theme: that Cuba represented the future Latin America needed. Speech after speech praised Cuba and denounced the United States (along with occasional in-fighting, such as a

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<sup>22</sup> Renata Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico’s Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969,” *Latin American Research Review* 47, no. 2 (2012): 100–119; Renata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Zolov, “¡Cuba Sí, Yanquis No!,” 223.

<sup>24</sup> Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption,” 104.

Colombian delegate's accusation that his countryman was a government spy).<sup>25</sup> Lombardo Toledano's speech is representative: he said, for example, that Latin America's common enemy is North American imperialism, and that "it is not impossible to dislodge it from our soils, as demonstrated by Cuba, which, headed by honest [*limpios*] leaders led by Fidel Castro Ruz, should serve as a guide to all of our hapless América Latina."<sup>26</sup>

Cárdenas, by far the most popular speaker, proposed the conference's official declaration and gave its closing speech at Arena México (with, according to the Dirección Federal de Seguridad, 10,000 people in attendance bearing Latin American national flags<sup>27</sup>). A DFS agent recounted Cárdenas's reading of the conference's official declaration: "in [Latin] America a new stage of liberation has begun...; the force that blocks us is North American imperialism in complicity with Latin American oligarchies, and it is necessary to destroy that imperialism... we need substantial political, economic and social changes... the defense of Cuba is the defense of all of Latin America."<sup>28</sup> Closing the conference, Cárdenas brought the discussion back to Mexico itself, saying "that he [Cárdenas] does not represent Mexico, but is just a simple citizen, nor does he represent the traitors of Acatempan or those who brought Maximilian to rule our destinies or the deserters of our Revolution; but that he does represent Hidalgo, Morelos, Juárez and Madero; he represents the poor, and that if the youth of Mexico want a greater homeland, that they should fight with all their might to achieve it and to defeat all the obstacles in their way, but recommended that they fight

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<sup>25</sup> Memorandum, Miguel Rangel Escamilla, Dirección Federal de Seguridad (henceforth DFS), 6 March 1961. Archivo General de la Nación (henceforth AGN), Galería 1, File 11-6-61, Bundle 3, Folio 3.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum, Miguel Rangel Escamilla, DFS, 6 March 1961. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-6-61, Bundle 3, Folio 4.

<sup>27</sup> The number seems high to me, as the DFS reported that daily attendance averaged 3,000 people or fewer. But it is possible: capacity at Arena México is 16,000 people. Memorandum, Miguel Rangel Escamilla, DFS, 8 March 1961. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-6-61, Bundle 3, Folio 78.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum, Miguel Rangel Escamilla, DFS, 8 March 1961. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-6-61, Bundle 3, Folios 66-67.

without violence, but civically, which in the end would bring peace, friendship and solidarity among all peoples.”<sup>29</sup> The connection between praise for Cuba and criticism of the direction that Mexico’s own revolution – and government – had taken was unmistakable.

The conference profoundly alarmed the Mexican government. The meeting was swarmed with agents from the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS) and *Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales* (General Department of Political and Social Investigations, DGIPS), Mexico’s primary domestic intelligence agencies, who sent reams of reports on the attendees, the speeches, and audience reactions to their superiors. Despite a government enforced press ban on the conference, the DFS reported that it had been a sensational success.<sup>30</sup>

Examined today, the speeches and declarations of the *Conferencia Pro-Paz* provoke perhaps nostalgia more than anything. They are of their time; un-ironic and naive in their enthusiastic endorsement of Cuba, their calls for Latin American liberation, and their vows to defend Latin America against U.S. imperialism (perhaps not so nostalgic, on second thought, as these tropes remain fodder for political speeches in Latin America today). Yet viewed within their context, they take on a more serious, potent light. Just weeks after the conference, after all, U.S.-trained and –armed Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs in an effort to depose Castro modeled after the CIA-orchestrated coup that had ousted the Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in 1954. Cárdenas attempted to make good on his promise to defend Cuba, boarding a plane in Mexico City to fly to Havana and join the defenders. Soldiers under orders from President López Mateos prevented the plane from taking off. Cárdenas instead drove to the zócalo (Mexico City’s central plaza) and gave a

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<sup>29</sup> Memorandum, Miguel Rangel Escamilla, DFS, 8 March 1961. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-6-61, Bundle 3, Folio 79.

<sup>30</sup> Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption,” 105.



speech denouncing the invasion to a crowd of thousands.<sup>31</sup> He followed up the speech with an intense campaign of letter-writing to world leaders and journalists to criticize the United States.

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, demonstrations against the United States broke out across Mexico. In Morelia, Michoacán, hundreds of students attacked and burned the Instituto Cultural Mexico-Norteamericano and protested the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Thousands of people marched in Guadalajara, including railroad workers, where police repelled a student attack on the U.S. consulate, and hundreds marched in Tijuana.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, López Mateos received a steady stream of reports from intelligence services, media sources, and fellow politicians that Cárdenas had been making ever more radical statements about the Mexican government, even, reportedly, making calls for a new revolution in Mexico.<sup>34</sup>

The most worrying development came in August. Along with other delegates to the Conferencia Pro-Paz, Cárdenas presided over the formation of a new group called the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Movement, MLN). The MLN was an umbrella organization that united more than 30 groups on the Mexican left, including the *Partido Obrero Campesino Mexicano*, the *Partido Comunista Mexicano*, the *Partido Popular Socialista Mexicano*, the *Liga Agraria Estatal* led by Alfonso Garzón, and the *Partido Agrario Obrero Morelense* led by Rubén Jaramillo, who was infamously murdered

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Zolov, “¡Cuba Sí, Yanquis No! The Sacking of the Instituto Cultural Mexico-Norteamericano in Morelia, Michoacán, 1961.”

<sup>33</sup> Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption,” 107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 106.

in 1962 by the Mexican army.<sup>35</sup> Braulio Maldonado was a founder, as was the famed Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, Lazaro's son and future presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and stalwarts of the Mexican left like Eli de Gortari, Jacinto López, Manuel Marcue Pardiñas, and PCM member Arturo Orona and women including Clementina de Bassols, Marta Bórquez, and Adelina Zendejas.<sup>36</sup>

The MLN's stated goals were modest, even vague. Claiming to be not a political party but merely a civic group, the MLN's mandate was to support the Cuban Revolution and reform the Mexican one. It called for familiar themes like agrarian reform, fairer distribution of wealth, and national control of natural resources, which had all been part of the declaration issued at the Conferencia Pro-Paz. Most of the group's membership base drew from its affiliated organizations, and its activities were mostly limited to meetings, rallies, educational sessions, and pamphleteering. Nonetheless, within a year the group counted tens of thousands of members.<sup>37</sup> Its official disavowal of participation in electoral politics was undermined by some members who told journalists off the record that the group did indeed intend to challenge the PRI at the ballot box; the United States embassy also reported that the Mexican government expected the MLN to evolve into a political party.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever its political ambitions, the group represented an enormous symbolic challenge to the PRI leadership. As Gilbert M. Joseph and Jurgen Buchenau have pointed

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<sup>35</sup> Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priista, 1940-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Political Polarization of Left and Right in Mexico, U.S. Embassy in Mexico, confidential despatch, 31 August 1961. National Archives, RG 59, 1960-63, Box 1509, Folder 712.00/7-761. Viewable online at the National Security Archive Website, < <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB124/doc05.pdf>>.

<sup>37</sup> In 2010 Renata Keller interviewed the former MLN leader A. Aguilar Monteverde, who claimed the MLN had over 300,000 members in 600 local committees. Keller, "A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption," 108.

<sup>38</sup> "Conservative and Communist Forces in Mexico Prepare for the Next Presidential Elections," U.S. Embassy in Mexico, confidential despatch, 26 November, 1961. National Archives, RG 59, 1960-63, Box 1509, Folder 712.00/11-161. Viewable online at the National Security Archive website: <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB124/doc09.pdf>>.

out,, Cárdenas's position as figurehead of the MLN and his outspoken support for Cuba were an unprecedented critique of the ruling party by a former president, particularly one as popular as Cárdenas.<sup>39</sup> The Cuban Revolution and Cárdenas's return to the political eye had created the discursive space for an outpouring of criticism of the PRI and calls for reform of Mexico's politics and development. As Eric Zolov wrote, "While Cárdenas reminded Mexicans of their own, still unfulfilled revolutionary aspirations, the heroic unfolding of the Cuban Revolution provided a mirror into which young Mexicans were able to gaze and relive, however vicariously, their nation's history of anti-imperialist struggle."<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the surge of support for Cuba and its merger with calls for reform forced the Mexican government to adopt much friendlier relations with Cuba than it would have preferred. As relations between Castro and the United States crumbled after 1959, the Mexican government remained stalwartly supportive of the Cuban government. After the success of the Revolution, President López Mateos had praised it, comparing it to Mexico's own, and had declared, in July of 1960, that "My government is, within the Constitution, of the extreme left." Mexico hosted the Cuban President, Osvaldo Dorticós, in a tour of Mexico in 1960 that drew large, enthusiastic crowds, which deeply moved Dorticós. At the Punta del Este Conference in 1962, Mexico resisted U.S. efforts to isolate Cuba, eventually abstaining from the vote to expel it from the organization.<sup>41</sup>

However, as Renata Keller has argued, Mexico's support for Cuba was ambiguous at best and motivated mostly by domestic political concerns. While the Mexican government

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<sup>39</sup> G. M Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 150.

<sup>40</sup> Zolov, "¡Cuba Sí, Yanquis No! The Sacking of the Instituto Cultural Mexico-Norteamericano in Morelia, Michoacán, 1961," 225.

<sup>41</sup> Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, 2015, 61-63.

proclaimed its Revolutionary solidarity with Cuba, behind the scenes its officials disdained the Cuban example. More profoundly, they were profoundly concerned by the support for Cuba that had become an oblique critique of the PRI. As Keller has argued, the Mexican government embraced Cuba primarily to placate leftists at home. It hoped that by taking up their enthusiasm for Castro, the PRI could maintain its aura of Revolutionary legitimacy and dull the edge from the more activist leftists, such as the MLN.<sup>42</sup>

Less than three months after the founding of the MLN, as PRI leadership still struggled to control the forces unleashed by the Cuban Revolution, Mexicali's irrigation water more than quadrupled in salinity and the Mexicali Valley broke out in anger. The timing could not have been worse for the Mexican government. In the context of the Cuban Revolution, Cárdenas's forceful return to the political scene and the creation of the MLN, the Mexican government was on high alert for protests and unrest, particularly when related to questions of international relations. The protests unleashed by the salinity issue had the potential to make the PRI's problems even worse.

Yet even as Mexicans' embrace of the symbolism of Cuba and the Cold War worried the PRI, so too did it concern foreign policy officials in the United States, who were desperate to win allies in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution. Recent literature on the Cold War has emphasized its global dimensions and ideological character. Scholars like Odd Arne Westad have shown that the Cold War was not just a military showdown between the United States and the U.S.S.R., but also entailed an ideologically driven competition between the two powers to win adherents to their respective visions of modernity and development.<sup>43</sup> To put it plainly, both the United States and the Soviet Union attempted to make their

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Oscar Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola del valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C., México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1990).

country and their way of life look good, and to make the other's look bad, in order to win allies in the Third World. This allowed weaker countries to demand concessions and material support from the powers to secure their loyalty. Contrary to what was once thought, Third World allies were not so much satellites, puppets, or client states of the superpowers, but rather temperamental allies of convenience won at great cost.

Dark fears of communist threats and great hopes in the transformative power of modernization theory undergirded much of the United States' actions in the Cold War. Many U.S. policy makers worried that an exploding global population, chronic underdevelopment, and a "revolution of rising expectations" would drive into the hands of Communism those who could not secure the fruits of modern industry and development for themselves. Conversely, they believed that people who lived like Americans would begin to think like Americans: that people who experienced Western-style industrial-capitalism and consumerism would become democratic citizens. All around the globe, the United States acted on the idea that underdeveloped countries poised for industrial "take off" could be jump-started to industrial development with enormous infusions of American capital and technical know-how in huge social and environmental engineering projects.<sup>44</sup>

President John F. Kennedy made Latin America a centerpiece for this strategy when he announced the Alliance for Progress in 1961. Conceived in response to the Cuban Revolution, the Alliance envisioned a ten-year program to stimulate economic growth, foment democracy, and achieve social change such as literacy, reduced wealth disparity, and

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Michael E Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Stephen G Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

land reform. Under the Alliance, the United States would invest \$20 billion over ten years, and Latin American countries \$80 billion over the same period, in programs proposed by member countries and approved and overseen by an expert panel. Kennedy saw the plan as no less than “the task of creating an American [viz, Pan-American] civilization where spiritual and cultural values are strengthened by an ever-broadening base of material advance, where, within the rich diversity of its own traditions, each nation is free to follow its own path toward progress.”<sup>45</sup>

Scholars since – and some policy-makers at the time – have argued that the Alliance for Progress was not as revolutionary a change in policy as it has been seen, and continued many policies started under President Eisenhower.<sup>46</sup> But the Alliance did mark a significant change in rhetoric and emphasis on the part of the United States. As Stephen Rabe has written, Kennedy likely had more personal concern for and desire to help Latin America than any other president before.<sup>47</sup> The Alliance reflected a genuine desire to help and to make the United States a better friend of Latin America, with recognition of its imperialistic role in the region’s history. (Ironically, the Alliance failed in part because officials like Kennedy continued to make rabidly anti-Communist, counter-insurgency interventionism a key tool of U.S. foreign policy; it also fell victim to technical problems, lack of funding, fallacious theories of development, and elite and middle class resistance to change.) Certainly, officials in the White House and Department of State recognized that U.S. prestige in Latin America rode on the success or failure of the Alliance. As the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Thomas C.

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<sup>45</sup> “Preliminary Formulations of the Alliance for Progress,” Address by President Kennedy at White House Reception for Latin American Diplomats and Members of Congress, 13 March 1961. Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University. <<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1961kennedy-afp1.html>>

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Tunstall Allcock, “Becoming ‘Mr. Latin America’: Thomas C. Mann Reconsidered,” *Diplomatic History* 38, No. 5 (November 2014), 1025.

<sup>47</sup> Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*.

Mann, put it, “many Latin Americans already refer to the program not as the ‘Alliance for Progress’ but as the ‘Kennedy Plan.’”<sup>48</sup>

The U.S. government’s sensitivity over its image in Latin America offered a paradoxical opportunity to the Mexican government in the salinity dispute. While the unrest over salinity in Mexicali and the pro-Cuba movement more broadly challenged the PRI’s authority, they also put pressure on the United States. Mexican protesters and government officials alike drew upon the rhetoric and symbolism of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution to goad the United States to cease the flow of salt into the Colorado River.

The strategy began soon after the salinity problem began. In December of 1961, David Herrera Jordán shared his forebodings that the salinity dispute might drag on interminably with the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. He advised that pressure needed to be put on the United States, thought that the protests then occurring in Mexicali would be the best way to exert that pressure on U.S. authorities.<sup>49</sup> The same day, the Baja California senator Gustavo Vildósola wrote to Thomas Mann, and did exactly what Herrera had recommended: “This situation [the salinity problem] can be taken advantage of by the enemies of the friendly relations between our two countries to create a situation of agitation right on the border and distrust in the Good Neighbor policy of the United States.”<sup>50</sup> A month later, President López Mateos echoed the sentiment in a letter to President Kennedy, warning that the damages caused by the saline waters had caused great anger among Mexicalenses, who had demanded “again and again” that his government take steps to solve the problem.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Mann to Department of State, 20 October 1961. JFK, National Security Files – Mexico, Box 141, Folder: Mexico General 1/61-5/62.

<sup>49</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, 15 December 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-1, Folios 106-107.

<sup>50</sup> Vildósola to Mann, 15 December 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-1, Folio 113.

<sup>51</sup> López Mateos to Kennedy, 16 January 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-2, Folios 71-73.

Kennedy's announcement of the Alliance for Progress in March 1962 offered Mexico an even greater rhetorical vocabulary for holding the United States to its own ideals. In February, 1962, the U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, offered Mexico funds from the Alliance for Progress to pay for the construction of tile drainage in the Mexicali Valley. While better drainage was sorely needed in Mexicali, with or without the salinity from Wellton-Mohawk, the offer reflected the U.S. position that the problem was not the salt, but Mexicali's deficient infrastructure. Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores Manuel Tello rejected the offer outright and scolded Rusk: "As you will remember, the Alliance for Progress is based in the principle of self-help [*esfuerzo propio*]... the Mexicali Valley is one of the fastest growing of the Republic and constitutes a clear demonstration of the application of the 'principle of self help.' It has been converted into one of the most progressed regions of Mexico and the farmers, thanks to their initiative, their entrepreneurial spirit... and their hard work have achieved a standard of living of which they are rightly proud."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the new discourse of the Alliance for Progress, many Mexicans invoked President Franklin Roosevelt's earlier Good Neighbor policy to highlight U.S. hypocrisy in its treatment of Mexico. As Tello put it in his letter to Rusk, "It is difficult for me to imagine that a solution cannot be found based in the law, in equity, and the spirit of friendship and good neighborliness that exists between our two countries and our two Governments."<sup>53</sup> At the December 31<sup>st</sup> demonstration in Mexicali, Comité de Defensa coordinator Aurelio Flores Valenzuela gave a speech lambasting U.S. hypocrisy in propagating the Alliance for Progress at the same time as salt flowed into Mexico. "Our northern neighbor has expressed many times its interest in helping the progress of the Latin American nations and has made a big

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<sup>52</sup> Tello to Rusk, 1 March 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-3, Folios 173-174.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



show of its good neighbor policy. Nonetheless, it seems the reality is something else, and these acts have shown that they only intend to interpret Treaties the way it suits them”. He then repeated a favorite joke of the region: “when they say ‘Good Neighbors’ it means that we are the Good, and they are the Neighbors.”<sup>54</sup>

With jokes like this and in other ways, everyday Mexicalenses used the rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress to criticize the United States over salinity. In November 1961, the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, Asociación Algodonera, and Mexicali Chamber of Commerce sent an open letter to the U.S. consul in Mexicali, James Boyd. “[A]s you know, the North American people has enjoyed our sympathy, and that is why we are so surprised by the attitude of the American Government, which, through the Alliance for Progress, hopes to help Latin American countries, and now commits aggressive acts... whose damages are infinitely higher than anything that would have resulted from the nuclear test explosions underway in Communist countries.”<sup>55</sup> At later demonstrations in Mexicali, protesters carried banners with the slogan “*Salianza Para el Progreso*, a play on words combining “salt” (*sal*) with “alliance” (*alianza*), and paraded them in front of the U.S. consulate and border crossing. Other banners critiqued the Good Neighbor policy with the slogan “*Buena Vecindad... ¡Bah!* (Good Neighbor... Bah!). Another showed a cartoon Uncle Sam shaking salt onto a diminutive representation of the Mexicali Valley as a *sombrero*-wearing stereotypical Mexican peasant, while an indignant globe shouted “Enough salt already!”<sup>56</sup>

American observers also sensed the tension between the salinity problem and Alliance for Progress goals. An article in the *Denver Post* said that “Relations with the rest of

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<sup>54</sup> Speech of Aurelio Flores Valenzuela, 31 December 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-144-3, Folios 186-191.

<sup>55</sup> Liga de Comunidades Agrarias et al to Boyd, 29 November 1961. IIC-UABC, Rafael Martínez Retes Papers, Folder 2.

<sup>56</sup> Various photographs. IIC-UABC, Colección Fotográfica.

Latin America, and even the Alliance for Progress, are regarded [in Mexico] as dependent on the outcome of this dispute.<sup>57</sup> A sympathetic article in the *Los Angeles Times* likewise emphasized Mexicalenses' self-image as progressive, entrepreneurial, and in no need of Alliance for Progress aid. It quoted Rafael Martínez Retes, head of the Asociación Algodonera and one of the leaders of the Comité de Defensa, saying that Mexicali did not need handouts and that drainage infrastructure (referring to Rusk's offer of funds for tile drainage) was not a U.S. responsibility.<sup>58</sup> Countering claims that unrest in Mexicali was the result of leftist agitation and did not reflect common opinion, it said that the farmers' anger could not be attributed to leftists; most Mexicalenses remained polite and friendly towards Americans in general, but angry over Alliance for Progress hypocrisy. Indeed, it went to great lengths to portray Mexicans in a good light as honest, hard-working people little different in ethnicity or values from Americans. The article interviewed one "Andres" who, "in his high-crowned, wide-brimmed felt hat look[ed] more like a sun-tanned Texan than a Baja California colono" – emphasizing that as a colono, he owned private property as opposed to the communal landholding of ejidatorios.<sup>59</sup> If anger over the salinity was shared even by non-socialistic private property-owning, Texan-looking, hard-working Mexicans, the article implied, then the United States had a real problem on its hands.

Thus by the time Kennedy arrived in Mexico City in June of 1962, the salinity problem had grown from its local roots in the politics and ecology of Mexicali and had become embedded within the rhetorical framework of the Cold War. The salinity had begun to represent a litmus test for the issues at stake in the wake of the Cuban Revolution,

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<sup>57</sup> "Salty U.S. Water Leaves Mexicans With Bitter Taste," *The Denver Post*, 16 March 1962.

<sup>58</sup> "Cotton Acreage Cut Upsets Farmers of Mexicali Most," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 March 1962.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

nationally and domestically. Cuba had accused the United States of imperialism and heavy-handed meddling in Latin America with callous disregard for its people. The United States, in contrast, had claimed to be the leader of the free world and dedicated itself to Latin America's development through the Alliance for Progress. Its handling of the salinity issue, Mexicans had declared, would prove which interpretation was more correct.

At the summit, moreover, López Mateos cemented salinity's position as the fulcrum of Mexico's foreign policy balancing act between Cuba and the United States. Kennedy wished to nudge Mexico away from its sympathetic relationship with Cuba, in part by gaining Mexican support for the Alliance for Progress. Yet with Mexicans' enthusiasm for Cuba feeding an unprecedented critique of the PRI, the Mexican government could ill afford to further alienate disaffected leftists – particularly when the salinity problem had both roused new angers and symbolized the U.S. insensitivity to Latin America and the PRI's empty Revolutionary promises. At the summit, López Mateos resisted Kennedy's efforts to separate the issues of salinity and Cuba, and instead combined them, making the course of Mexico's relationship with Cuba dependent on the United States' handling of the salinity problem.

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Mexico's ambassador to the United States, Antonio Carrillo Flores, was not only well-liked around Washington D.C., but well-respected too. The son of the revered composer Julián Carrillo Trujillo, Carrillo had a long record of excellence and service to Mexico. Formerly a professor of law and economics at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (Mexican National Autonomous University, UNAM), Carrillo had served as a financial advisor to President Miguel Aleman (1940-1946) and as Minister of Finance under

President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1946-1952), in addition to roles in university education and government finance. Ambassador to the United States since 1958, his U.S. counterparts thought of him as “one of Mexico’s foremost financier-economists” and noted that while “he received his early political education in the leftist climate of revolutionary Mexico and is still strongly nationalistic in his thinking, he is regarded as a member of the country’s more conservative business element... As Ambassador to the United States he has been friendly, constructive, and extremely cooperative.”<sup>60</sup> Carrillo was popular in D.C. circles, where he was known as Tony. An avid golfer, he never lacked for company on the course, and the well heeled jostled to be invited to the renowned parties he and his wife hosted at the Mexican embassy. On a more professional level, White House officials recognized Carrillo as capable and professional, a meticulous, skillful, and forthright ambassador.

On the morning of November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1961, Carrillo made his way from the Mexican embassy to the Department of State offices at Foggy Bottom. This was no social call. For several weeks, his superiors at the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations, SRE) had been receiving increasingly anxious communications from the *Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas* (CILA), the Mexican section of the International Boundaries and Waters Commission. Broad-based popular demonstrations against the salt had already taken place in Mexicali, and more were planned. The atmosphere was tense. Mexico had stopped all diversions of Colorado River water, so while the salt would not do further damage, nor did the Valley have the supply of water it desperately needed. The Mexican CILA commissioner David Herrera Jordán had warned the SRE that the situation in Mexicali was very serious: social unrest continued to grow as the salinity problem went

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<sup>60</sup> Unattributed, undated report. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (henceforth JFK), National Security Files – Mexico, Box 141, Folder: Mexico General 6/62-9/62, Document 36a.

unresolved. Many farmers had lost their entire winter crop, and numerous illnesses attributed to drinking the saline water had been reported.<sup>61</sup> The protests, moreover, had the support of all classes and sectors of Mexicalense society, from *braceros* to businessmen, farmers to financiers. Local authorities worried that anger over the salt could get out of hand.

That morning Carrillo bore Diplomatic Note #4012, an official communication between his country and the United States. It was a formal protest that accused the United States of breaching the 1944 Waters Treaty, by preventing the beneficial use for domestic, industrial, and agricultural purposes that the treaty guaranteed. Furthermore, the letter charged, the United States was contaminating an international body of water to the detriment of other users, a clear violation of the principles of international law. Moreover, said the letter, the United States had negated the spirit of cooperation and good will that had characterized recent relations between the two countries. It called on the United States to immediately stop the pumping from Wellton-Mohawk and to ensure that the water delivered to Mexico be of usable quality.<sup>62</sup>

Six weeks later, the Department of State answered Mexico's complaint. It stated that the 1944 Treaty made no guarantee of water quality and had in fact anticipated the present salinity issue in its stipulation that Mexico's share of water could come from "any and all sources" of the Colorado, including "return waters" from irrigation. The United States was studying the problem and would do whatever it could to alleviate it, the reply said, but the federal government believed that it was complying with the treaty and that the Wellton-

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<sup>61</sup> Memorandum, Dirección General de Límites y Aguas to SRE, 11 December 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-1, Folio 37.

<sup>62</sup> Diplomatic Note #4012, 9 November 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-4, Folios 25-33.

Mohawk flows were a “natural and normal” part of the Colorado and merely a consequence of normal irrigation and development practices.<sup>63</sup>

This first exchange anticipated the fundamental difference in how each country viewed the salinity problem and interpreted the Treaty of 1944, a difference that remained at the heart of the salinity dispute until 1973. Based on the differing context and aims of each country, each had negotiated the treaty with different objectives in mind. Therefore, each interpreted the problem of salinity and what the Treaty had to say about it differently. These interpretations were guided, of course, by self-interest: neither country wished to take responsibility for the problem or give up its stake in the river’s water. But the intractability of the difference of opinion indicates how each country viewed the river from its own context. Because the fundamental legal disagreement remained essentially deadlocked throughout the next twelve years, moreover, the salinity dispute involved much more than juridical treaty interpretation and became interwoven with the broader questions of sovereignty, fairness, and treatment among nations at stake in the global Cold War.

The objectives with which each country had negotiated the 1944 Treaty – stemming from the differing contexts and histories of Colorado River development in each – set the stage for the opposing perspectives on the salinity problem. At the time the treaty was negotiated, the United States had achieved, technically speaking, total control over the Colorado’s waters – had it wished to, it could have cut off Mexico from the river completely. Mexican negotiators, therefore, were determined to gain as large of a share of the river’s water as possible. Beyond this, they were largely uninterested in how water was divided within the United States. U.S. negotiators, however, desired to broker an arrangement not

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<sup>63</sup> Department of State to SRE, 20 December 1961. SRE, CILA, C-132-1, pages 53-56.

only with Mexico but among the seven U.S. states that shared the watershed. The uncertainty over the lack of an agreement was hindering further plans for water development in the Southwest. For the United States, therefore, the treaty needed to strike a deal with Mexico *and* to appease Arizona, which demanded more water and refused to ratify the 1922 Colorado River Compact. As described in Chapter 1, this dilemma was solved by allowing Arizona to count its “return flow” – that is, the water that returns to the river after being diverted for irrigation and other purposes – towards the volume it was required to deliver to Mexico. By allowing return water to be counted in this way, the Treaty permitted the 7.5 million acre-feet allotted to the Lower Basin to become 9 million acre-feet of water actually delivered: it re-used some of Arizona’s return water to satisfy Mexico’s share.<sup>64</sup>

Each country believed that the language of the treaty protected its objectives. The treaty, as mentioned, makes no mention of water quality. Yet its pre-amble states that its purpose is to “obtain the most complete and satisfactory utilization” of the rivers’ waters, and Article 8 states that both countries have a common interest in “obtaining the most beneficial” use of the water through its conservation and management.<sup>65</sup> From the Mexican perspective, this implied that water delivered to Mexico had to be of at least usable quality. The treaty also states that Mexico’s share of the Colorado’s water could come “from any and all sources” of the river, later adding “whatever their origin.” From the U.S. perspective, this language reserved the right to deliver return flow as part of Mexico’s allotment. The lack of wording on water quality, moreover, allowed for the fact that return water, having percolated

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<sup>64</sup> See Norris Hundley Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Norris Hundley et al., *Water and the West: The Colorado River Compact and the Politics of Water in the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>65</sup> “Utilization of Waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and the Rio Grande,” 14 November 1944. <<http://www.ibwc.state.gov/Files/1944Treaty.pdf>>.

through the soil and absorbed its mineral content, has much higher salinity than when it was diverted.

Because of these perspectives on the treaty, each country saw the salinity problem differently. A week after Carrillo Flores had delivered Mexico's official complaint, the head engineer of the U.S. section of the IBWC, Joseph Friedkin, visited the Mexicali Valley with Leon Bernstein, a scientist from the University of California-Riverside's Salinity Laboratory. The problem, they reported, was not the salinity of the irrigation water, but the agricultural practices of Mexicalense farmers. Mexico simply had too much area under cultivation for the amount of water it received. With irrigation water stretched too thin over too great an area, the volume applied was insufficient to flush mineral build-up down past the root zone. They recommended that Mexico drastically reduce the amount of cultivated land in winter, using the water saved to irrigate the reduced acreage more frequently. The higher volume would flush salts out of the soil, avoiding mineral build-up and damage to plants.<sup>66</sup>

For Mexicans, this was irrelevant, but also hurtful – because partly true. As Óscar Sánchez, an engineer employed by the Distrito de Riego, would later write, “while the criticism hurt, especially because it came from foreigners, unfortunately what it described was the reality.”<sup>67</sup> Mexico's irrigation and drainage infrastructure was old and decrepit. Most of it had been constructed up to fifty years before by the Colorado River Land Company and was in serious disrepair. The only drainage infrastructure was ditch drainage, the least effective method, but most plots lacked even this rudimentary form. The inability of the Distrito de Riego to limit water use in the 1950s, moreover, meant that Mexico was indeed cultivating more acreage than prudent soil husbandry would suggest.

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<sup>66</sup> CILA-IBWC Memorandum, 16 November 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-1, Folios 38-40.

<sup>67</sup> Oscar Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola del valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C., México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1990).



As a result, the problem of salinity had already appeared by the mid-1950s, before construction of the Wellton-Mohawk project even began. Starting in 1955, the Distrito de Riego conducted periodic studies on salinity in the region; the 1957 report warned that “The importance of the problem of salinity in the Distrito de Riego cannot be emphasized enough; the problem grows like a cancer over the entire region, and will annihilate it if the proper measures to fight it are not taken.”<sup>68</sup> It reported that 110,865 hectares of the Valley’s cultivated area were heavily affected by salt, out of a total of about 275,000 hectares. The cause was two-fold: too little water being applied over too great an area to flush salts through the soil, hindered even more by the severe lack of drainage infrastructure.

While partially true, Friedkin’s accusations angered Mexicans. Mexico’s homegrown water problems were a domestic matter, not the business of the United States, and furthermore, had little to do with the issue at hand: the salinity of the water being delivered to Mexico, not the build-up of salts in the valley’s soil. David Herrera Jordán, the Mexican CILA commissioner, reminded Friedkin that the salt afflicted not only agriculture but had also been leaving damaging mineral scale in the machinery of the Valley’s cottonseed processing factories. It also affected Mexicali’s drinking water supply, and had reportedly made several people sick.<sup>69</sup> Improvements to Mexicali’s drainage infrastructure and a reduction in cultivated acreage would have no effect on these problems, which were caused entirely by the uptick in salinity from Wellton-Mohawk.

More infuriating was the U.S. hypocrisy embodied in this kind of accusation. In January, an Arizonan reporter asked James Stone, a U.S.-born senior executive with la

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<sup>68</sup> Miguel Brambil Rulfo, Tercer Informe Anual del Estudio de las Condiciones de Salinidad del Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, July 1957. Archivo Histórico del Agua (AHA), Fondo Consultivo Técnico (CT), Box 17, File 102 (1<sup>st</sup> Part), Folio 4.

<sup>69</sup> CILA-IBWC Memorandum, 16 November 1961. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-1, Folios 38-40.

Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, the largest cotton processing and exporting firm in Mexicali, what should be done with the saline water pumped from Wellton-Mohawk. Stone replied that it should be put into the All-American Canal and sent to farmers in the Imperial Valley. When the reporter, surprised, asked him if he thought California would ever accept that, he replied that of course not, but it would be “equally ridiculous to think that for Mexico it would be acceptable to receive the saline waters.”<sup>70</sup> Many Mexicalenses shared Stone’s opinion: it was not just the salinity that rankled, but the United States’ hypocritical double standard towards Mexico.

While the United States argued that the treaty permitted it to deliver Mexico water of any quality, whatever its origin – including return water, Mexico argued that the water from Wellton-Mohawk was not a source of the river at all. It was therefore not return water but something else entirely, and thus not acceptable under the treaty. This argument hinged on the fact that Wellton-Mohawk was not a conventional irrigation project. Normally, water is diverted from the river onto an agricultural area for irrigation; it percolates into the soil and flows underground back into the main flow of the river. But Mexico argued that was not the case at Wellton-Mohawk.

David Herrera Jordán made the case to Leland H. Hewitt, the U.S. IBWC commissioner, in early January. The saline water from Wellton-Mohawk was not regular irrigation drainage, he wrote. In fact, the volume of water being pumped out of the ground at Wellton-Mohawk was *higher* than the volume applied at the surface for irrigation. Moreover, its salt content was drastically higher than if the water were regular agricultural drainage. The wells at Wellton-Mohawk were instead pumping from the deepest parts of the aquifer,

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<sup>70</sup> Memorandum of Meeting, 24 January 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-2, Folios 83-84.

sucking up mineral-laden “fossil” waters that had sat inert underground for thousands of years. The pumps at Wellton-Mohawk were designed not just to facilitate drainage or lower the water table, they were calculated to “wash” the entire aquifer of its salt content to create an underground reservoir of fresh water for future use. Pumping into the Colorado River water that would otherwise not move could not be considered return water as the treaty defined; it was, rather, pollution. “I have the conviction,” Herrera wrote, “that this contamination would not be present if the river were not international but instead inter-statal within the United States and that the discharge of salts would have been moderated in order to prevent harm to downstream users.”<sup>71</sup> Hewitt made no concession: “I have given careful consideration to the points made in your letter, but am unable to agree that these Wellton-Mohawk return flows constitute a violation of the Water Treaty.”<sup>72</sup>

SRH officials made this argument in greater detail in a report prepared for the Mexican delegates to the second Mexico-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Summit that was to be held in April, 1962. These yearly meetings brought senators from both countries together in a congenial setting (often a Mexican resort town like Puerto Vallarta) to discuss bi-national issues. The report (with a handy English translation) showed diagrams of the underground geology of the Wellton-Mohawk Valley. The water being pumped from the wells there, it showed, was entrapped by a bedrock basin, and would never on its own return to the Colorado River. It was therefore not return water, nor even a source of the Colorado River.<sup>73</sup> As another CILA memorandum put it, “the waters cannot be considered return waters, and

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<sup>71</sup> Herrera Jordán to Hewitt, 8 January 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-2, Folios 48-51.

<sup>72</sup> Hewitt to Herrera Jordán, 29 January 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-5, Folio 33.

<sup>73</sup> Luis Guzman Garduño, Report to the Second Mexico-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Summit, April 1962. Instituto de Investigaciones Culturales, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (henceforth IIC-UABC), Rafeal Martínez Retes Papers, Folder 2.

delivering them [to Mexico] as such implies a substitution that violates the Waters Treaty.”<sup>74</sup>

The United States, however, maintained its position that the wording of the treaty permitted the underground pumping underway at Wellton-Mohawk.

Hoping to break the deadlock, in mid-March the IBWC-CILA, Department of State, and SRE announced the formation of a bi-national commission of scientists to study the salinity problem and recommend a solution to it after 45 days.<sup>75</sup> The scientists were instructed to leave aside questions of legal interpretation and instead focus on the technical aspects of the problem. While the main point of contention by that point was juridical, evidently each country believed that the technical details vindicated its legal position.<sup>76</sup>

The instruction notwithstanding, each country’s scientists were given a political briefing before traveling to Mexicali. David Herrera Jordán told the Mexican scientists that “The problem could be summarized in two definitions, what are return waters and what are sources [of the river]; the general disagreement is rooted on that issue, because both sides give them a different interpretation.”<sup>77</sup> The United States, warned SRH engineer José Gorostiza, would attempt to make the case that the problem was due to deficient drainage infrastructure in Mexicali. Mexico’s official preference, he said, was to leave the question of drainage in Mexicali out of the report and to advocate for the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk to be isolated from the rest of Mexico’s treaty amount, preferably with the

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<sup>74</sup> Unattributed memorandum. SRE, CILA, C-134-3, Folios 9-16.

<sup>75</sup> Press Release, 16 March 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-7, Folio 43.

<sup>76</sup> The U.S. members of the commission were Charles Bower, of the Salinity Laboratory at the University of California, Riverside, Russell H. Brown, Chief of Research for the Ground Water Branch of the United States Geological Survey, John Harshbarger, Professor of Geology at the University of Arizona, Stephen Reynolds, State Engineer of New Mexico, and Arthur F. Pillsbury, Professor of Irrigation and Irrigation Engineering at the University of California, Los Angeles. Department of State to U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 26 March, 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Mexico, Box 141, Folder: Mexico General 1/61-5/62. The Mexican commission was made up by César Jiménez López, Heinz Lesser-Jones, Rodolfo P. Peregrina Robles, Dr. Rodolfo Moreno Dhame and Luis Zierold Reyes. SRE Memorandum, 23 March 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-3, Folios 175-180.

<sup>77</sup> SRE Memorandum, 23 March 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-134-3, Folios 175-180.

construction of a new canal to convey it below Mexico's diversion works at Morelos Dam.<sup>78</sup> (White House Staffer Robert Sayre briefed the U.S. scientists, but I did not find records of what was said in that meeting.<sup>79</sup>)

Mexican hopes that the joint commission's recommendations would favor Mexico were high. As the commission began its work, a CILA employee wrote that "the climate established by the International Boundaries and Waters Commission to reach a practical solution could not be better... in fact, the U.S. technicians are in total agreement with the technical conclusions of the Mexican section."<sup>80</sup> But as the 45-day period of study wore on, this optimism began to fade. Protests continued in the Mexicali Valley, and at the end of the 45-day period, the joint commission requested more time. Finally, on May 8<sup>th</sup> it issued a preliminary, unofficial report that was reviewed by authorities in both countries but not released to the public. It recommended the construction of a new canal parallel to the existing one from Wellton-Mohawk, and that both be extended to Presa Morelos, the Mexicali Valley's diversion point. Next, it recommended that additional wells be dug in the Wellton-Mohawk district. Since groundwater in the Wellton-Mohawk district was not uniformly salty, the water from higher-salinity wells would be carried in the new canal and dumped below Presa Morelos; water from lower-salinity wells would be delivered above Presa Morelos and mixed in with Mexicali's irrigation water.<sup>81</sup>

Mexico, however, rejected the proposal. The decision greatly disappointed the White House and the Department of State. The administration had hoped for a positive outcome in

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Department of State to U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 26 March, 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Mexico, Box 141, Folder: Mexico General 1/61-5/62.

<sup>80</sup> Unattributed Memorandum, 2 April 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-8, Folio 17.

<sup>81</sup> Tello to Rusk, 14 June 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-8, Folios 33-36.

the salinity dispute before Kennedy's visit to Mexico City in June. Ambassador Thomas Mann made a huge effort to reverse the Mexican decision. "I have gone all out in attempting to get Mexico to sign [the] joint report. Aside from talking frankly to Tello I have also seen Carrillo Flores twice and have had [a] long conversation with [the] Minister [of] Agriculture. I conclude it is president Lopez Mateos who has decided Mexico should not sign [the] joint report... I consider this problem [the] number one threat to good relations with Mexico."<sup>82</sup>

Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote huffily to Manuel Tello expressing his disappointment that Mexico should reject the joint recommendations of a commission it formed part of. He warned that "it will be somewhat more difficult for us to obtain prompt action within the United States Government in the absence of a joint report of this impartial character."<sup>83</sup> The obstacle to that "prompt action" was Arizona, where the influential Senator Carl Hayden had been leading a vocal campaign to discredit Mexico's complaints over the salinity problem. Before the report had even been finished, Hayden came out publicly against its findings, saying that the 1944 treaty had foreseen rising salinity, and that the problem lay not in Wellton-Mohawk but in the Mexicali Valley, where no drainage infrastructure had been built. Mexicans ignored common irrigation practices in California and Arizona, he said, where farmers irrigated with extra water to leach the salt content through the root zone and drain it from the soil.<sup>84</sup> (This truism of course ignored the fact that California and Arizona received a far larger share of water than Mexico did, and that this water went to far fewer farmers on far larger farms than in Mexico.)

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<sup>82</sup> Mann to Department of State, 1 June 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Mexico, Box 141, Folder: Mexico General 1/61-5/62.

<sup>83</sup> Rusk to Tello, 9 June 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-135-1, Folios 128-129.

<sup>84</sup> "Hayden contra el Plan Sobre la Salinidad," *Excelsior*, 12 June 1962.

Many Arizonans shared Hayden's opinion that Mexico's complaints over salinity amounted to nothing more than a conspiracy to demand more water from the United States. "All those Americans aren't mistaken," as an article in an Arizona agricultural magazine put it.<sup>85</sup> With the contradictory argument that there was no salinity problem, but if there was, it was through Mexican ignorance and carelessness, the article claimed "[t]he Mexicans of Mexicali Valley are making no effort whatever to mitigate the effects of excess salt – if there is an excess of any consequence... Measures which thousands of American farmers take as a matter of routine, and without complaint, are ignored." Mexico was complaining only in order to get more water from weak-willed bureaucrats in the Department of State: "If [Mexico's] demands are granted by a complaisant State Department, more concerned about international relations than the rights of American citizens, her new water will come off the top of what Arizona and California [use]."<sup>86</sup>

In fact, Mexico had other reasons for rejecting the commission's recommendations. As the draft report circulated among the commissioners, the CILA, and the SRE in late May, the Mexican delegation raised concerns about a clause that gave U.S. technicians the unilateral authority to decide what volume of water, and what salinity, Mexico would receive from Wellton-Mohawk as part of its annual treaty amount. This clause, they argued, could affect Mexico's legal position, which stated that the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk was not legal under the treaty. Accepting those waters as part of Mexico's treaty delivery would amount to a tacit admission that such waters were, to the contrary, legal.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "Mexican Water Grab," *Arizona Farmer-Ranchman*, June 1962.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Tello to Rusk, 14 June 1962. SRE, CILA, Folder C-132-8, Folios 33-36.

The U.S. delegation to the joint commission had refused Mexico's request to amend that clause to include a reservation of Mexico's legal rights on that specific point. With this refusal, the Mexican delegation recommended that the entire report be rejected. Manuel Tello fired back at Dean Rusk's accusation that the Mexican delegation had sabotaged the commission: "if the North American experts when compiling point number 5 [the clause in question] have not tried to affect the legal rights of Mexico I do not understand their reluctance to accept the observation [viz, the disclaimer reserving Mexico's legal position] – compiled in obliging terms that clearly indicate the desire to reach an accord – proposed by the Mexican experts."<sup>88</sup>

The joint commission had officially failed. Leland Hewitt, the U.S. commissioner to the IBWC, suggested that each delegation issue a separate report, but Tello rejected this idea. Instead, further action on the salinity problem was postponed until the following week, when President Kennedy would arrive in Mexico City for his first state visit to Mexico.

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The Kennedy administration hoped to use the summit to re-set its relations with Latin America after the embarrassment of the Bay of Pigs by boosting the stature of the Alliance for Progress and pulling Mexico further away from Cuba. Officials from both countries therefore recognized that more was at stake for the United States than Mexico. A month before the meeting, Antonio Carrillo met Kennedy's advisor for Latin America, Robert Sayre, to discuss agenda items for the summit – including the salinity problem. As Sayre told Ambassador Mann, the "Rationale he gave for Mexican agenda proposals was that Mexico believes US is now trying [to] improve its image in Latin America. Mexico considers no

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



better way for US to do this than [to] accept Chamizal award,” recognize Mexico’s claim to a 9-mile territorial limit at sea, and – Mexico’s biggest priority – resolve the salinity problem.<sup>89</sup>

This, and knowing that support for Cuba within Mexico had forced the Mexican government to the left, made the administration aware that the right tone had to be struck with Mexico. The United States could not be seen to disrespect Mexican sovereignty and self-determination. As Mann explained, “Mexicans respond to the ‘personal friend’ approach,” meaning Kennedy should not attempt to dictate terms, but should voice respect for Mexican decisions and be willing to offer concrete concessions. “President Lopez Mateos... is extremely conscious of his responsibility before history not to bend his knee to the United States, is anxious to avoid giving Mexican communists and leftists any pretense for claiming he has ‘sold out’ Mexican interests to United States ‘imperialism’ and is extremely sensitive to United States suggestions he should change Mexican policy on Cuba or any other subject.”<sup>90</sup>

Yet White House officials understood just as well that the issue of Mexico’s relationship with Cuba was more one of image than of conviction. For while the PRI government voiced support for Cuba, behind the scenes it showed an absolute willingness to suppress “anti-U.S., pro-Castro” protests and agitation.<sup>91</sup> After an April meeting with President López Mateos’s personal secretary, Humberto Romero, Thomas Mann reported that “[o]n the topic of security he assured me there was nothing to worry about. He said

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<sup>89</sup> Sayre to Mann, 2 May 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 1/1/62-5/10/62, Document 13.

<sup>90</sup> Airgram from Mann to Department of State, 3 May 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 1/1/62 – 5/10/62, Document 14.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Adams to Department of State, 31 May 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 5/11/62 – 5/31/62, Document 17.

government intended to organize some 2,000 students of the ‘right kind’ and implied they would be able to take care of ‘small groups’ of the ‘Cuba si, Yankee no’ type. He also said [the] Mexican Government intended to round up trouble makers and send them for a ‘visit’ to various jails in Central Mexico... He said I could rest assured Mexico knew how to treat its guests [and] expressed hope that [the] President would not be surround by so many secret service men as to prevent him from mingling with the people of Mexico.”<sup>92</sup>

In the days before Kennedy’s arrival, ten agents of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* were sent to movie theatres around Mexico City to gauge the audience’s reaction to newsreel shots of President Kennedy, in an effort to estimate how the public would respond when Kennedy arrived. “Audiences were indifferent”, the CIA blandly reported.<sup>93</sup> Even so, Mexican police arrested dozens of Communists before Kennedy arrived, and held them without charge until he had left.<sup>94</sup>

The Mexican government also took efforts to repress salinity-related protests. Before the visit, posters had gone up in Torreón, Coahuila reading “Socialist Cuba, Yes – Yankee Salt Water, No!” But police had removed the posters and arrested those responsible.<sup>95</sup> Before Kennedy’s arrival, the *Partido Comunista Mexicano* was preparing placards reading “We demand an end to the poisoning of the Mexicali Valley area by Gringo salt!” and “We

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<sup>92</sup> Mann to Department of State, 27 April 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 1/1/62 – 5/10/62, Document 11a.

<sup>93</sup> CIA Report, 21 June 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 6/21/62 – 6/25/62, Document 3.

<sup>94</sup> CIA Memorandum for Major General Chester V. Clifton, 22 June 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Adams to Department of State, 31 May 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 5/11/62 – 5/31/62, Document 17.

demand reparation for the damages caused by the salt!” that would be displayed in the parade planned for Kennedy from the airport to the *Palacio de Gobierno*.<sup>96</sup>

The CIA also learned that the *Partido Comunista Mexicano* was preparing placards reading “We demand an end to the poisoning of the Mexicali Valley area by Gringo salt!” and “We demand reparation for the damages caused by the salt!” that would be displayed in the parade planned for Kennedy from the airport to the *Palacio de Gobierno*.<sup>97</sup> But the agency was encouraged to hear that the Mexican government planned to secretly deputize thousands of members of a group called the *Frente Cívico Mexicano de Afirmación Revolucionaria* (Mexican Civic Front for Revolutionary Affirmation, FCMAR) and have them line the parade route in case protests broke out.<sup>98</sup>

A sort of right-wing mirror to the MLN, the FCMAR had been established in 1962 by former presidents Abelardo Rodríguez (also formerly the governor of Baja California) and Miguel Alemán, apparently with the support of López Mateos. Like the MLN, it had a vaguely-defined mandate to support the Mexican Revolution, “including fighting for its better development, correcting vices and amending errors,” and also committed itself to battling “enemies of democracy” such as Communism and “the other totalitarianisms that deny individual liberties, social guarantees and political rights.”<sup>99</sup> It most often deployed its members to intimidate leftist protesters and violently break up meetings of the MLN and other groups.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> CIA Telegram, 21 June 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62, Cables 6/21/62 – 6/25/62, Document 2a.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> “Implications of President Kennedy’s Visit to Mexico,” 13 September 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>99</sup> “Frente Cívico Mexicano de Afirmación Revolucionario: Estatutos.” Rutgers Universities Libraries, Robert J. Alexander Papers, Microfilm #Mex0166.

<sup>100</sup> “Extremists Map Drives in Mexico,” *New York Times*, 21 April 1963.

The Mexican government's willingness to play one faction off the other in this way could also work against U.S. interests. A background paper prepared in advance of the visit noted that "The Mexican Government manipulates public attitudes toward the U.S. to the best of its ability through a controlled press. When it wishes to arouse Mexicans against the U.S. (viz: to support a bargaining point) it bears down on envy and fear. When it wishes to calm Mexican concern about the U.S. (viz: to encourage investment or tourist travel) it bears down on respect and friendship... This manipulation often serves anti-American elements, both Marxist and chauvinistic... Any politician who might be openly and publicly pro-U.S. would be tagged as an 'entreguista' – one who 'surrenders' sovereignty."<sup>101</sup>

Thus the PRI's heavy hand in repressing the MLN and other leftists, particularly when achieved by methods like empowering the FCMAR, could just as easily be used to fan the flames *against* the United States. This was especially true for the volatile salinity issue. As a briefing paper for Kennedy put it, the salinity "is the most serious problem that has confronted the two countries in recent decades. It is important to Mexico economically and socially because the Mexicali Valley is one of the most important agricultural regions in Mexico. It is important politically, because the farmers affected must be provided with a livelihood or they will be susceptible to Communist influence."<sup>102</sup>

When Kennedy finally sat down with López Mateos, then, he began the conversation with salinity. Kennedy said that "he was not happy with what we had been doing... While there were no provisions in the treaty with respect to salt content, the United States should

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<sup>101</sup> Background Paper: The Public Psychology of Current U.S.-Mexican Relations," Undated. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President's Trip to Mexico 6/62, Briefing Book – Background Papers Tabs K-S.

<sup>102</sup> Position Paper: Salinity on the Lower Colorado River. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 237; Folder: President's Trip to Mexico 6/62, Briefing Book – Position Papers Tabs A-I.

seek in a friendly spirit to help maintain the quality of the water.”<sup>103</sup> Over the coming winter, he said, the United States would release an extra 250,000 acre-feet of water – part of a Bureau of Reclamation “scouring” plan to remove sediment buildup that would also serve to dilute the salt over the winter months. That would keep the salt to a safe level until the end of 1963, by which time he hoped the countries would have found a permanent solution to the problem. He said that any solution would have to satisfy Congress, and therefore could not alter the terms of the Treaty; it would have to be a cooperative effort that would include improvements to irrigation and drainage infrastructure in Mexicali.

López Mateos replied that by 1963 there might already be irreparable damage to Mexicali’s soil. He felt a new canal to by-pass the saline waters from Wellton-Mohawk directly to the Gulf of California would be the best solution to the problem. He also “confirmed that Mexico had a long time plan to improve Mexicali’s drainage. He thought that this was a problem which must be solved in a practical manner as quickly as possible, and nothing done in the Mexicali Valley would provide a solution.”<sup>104</sup> Ambassador Mann, who was present at the meeting, suggested that Mexico apply to the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development for a loan to construct drainage works in the Mexicali Valley. López Mateos replied that the loan and the drainage infrastructure would be worthless if the United States did not reduce the river’s salinity as well.

The discussion then turned to communism and the question of Cuba. Both Presidents agreed that Cuba posed a threat to the security of Latin America, and Kennedy “asked what President Lopez Mateos thought could be done to prevent the spread of Soviet power and

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<sup>103</sup> Memoranda of the President’s Conversations with Mexican President Lopez Mateos, 6 July 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 Memcons, Document 1a.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

doctrine via Cuba to other American Republics”, seemingly an oblique question about Mexico’s continued diplomatic relations with Cuba. “President Lopez Mateos repeated the familiar Mexican thesis: The important thing is to create better economic and social conditions and especially to provide jobs. When the people were better off, he thought, it would not be easy for the Communists to lead them astray. He stressed his opinion that the Alliance for Progress is the best way to combat Communism.”<sup>105</sup> Persisting, Kennedy “pointed out it would take a decade to achieve the objectives of the Alliance for Progress even under the best of conditions. In the meantime, the question was: What did Mexico think should be done to prevent the spread of Communism in other American Republics?... [Kennedy] returned again and again” to this question, and Lopez Mateos “each time repeated his view that rapid economic development and social progress was the answer.”<sup>106</sup>

López Mateos resisted Kennedy’s attempts to treat the salinity problem as a technical issue isolated from his main concerns about Cuba and the Alliance for Progress. The Mexican president instead made the latter issue dependent on the former. Slowing the spread of Communism, López Mateos implied, required the approach embodied in the Alliance: economic growth, social development, and respect for each country’s self-determination. The salinity problem threatened those very things in Mexicali. Keeping Mexico as an ally in the Cold War would therefore require resolving the salinity dispute in its favor.

This was underlined the next morning, when the two Presidents reconvened for more talks at *Los Pinos*. After “considerable further discussion of the salinity problem”, they finally agreed on the wording of the official Joint Communiqué that would be issued at the

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<sup>105</sup> Memoranda of the President’s Conversations with Mexican President Lopez Mateos, 6 July 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 Memcons, Document 1c.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

end of the summit. López Mateos then “expressed his concern that the [salinity] situation might become acute again after October 1963 which would be a very active period in preparation for the 1964 elections in Mexico.”<sup>107</sup>

In October 1963, Mexico would reduce its flow of water from the United States at the end of the cotton season, meaning the salt from Wellton-Mohawk would no longer be diluted and could again reach harmful levels. That Mexico would prefer to resolve the salinity issue before it recurred is self-evident. More significant was that López Mateos tied the possibility of an “acute” situation over salinity to the 1964 elections. For in October 1963 the PRI would also announce its candidate for the next presidential election – the so-called *dedazo*, or finger tap, which was all but equivalent to choosing the next president.

What López Mateos implied here was that if the salinity problem had not been resolved by October 1963, the unrest it caused could influence the choice of the next Mexican President. Given the context – Mexico’s support for Cuba, driven by leftist mobilization at home; the PRI’s willingness to manipulate public opinion; the political anathema in Mexico to appearing to surrender sovereignty to the United States – this could only be taken as a threat that the PRI would designate a more Cuba-friendly presidential candidate.

Kennedy understood the implication, and at Mexico’s insistence the Joint Communiqué’s wording was updated to reflect it. The Presidents affirmed each nation’s right to decide its own policies without outside influence – which for the United States, meant that the Soviet Union should stay out of Cuba and that Cuba should stay out of other Latin American countries, and to Mexico meant that Mexico had a right to maintain diplomatic ties

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<sup>107</sup> Memoranda of the President’s Conversations with Mexican President Lopez Mateos, 6 July 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 Memcons, Document 1d.

to Cuba. They endorsed the Alliance for Progress, with President Kennedy recognizing that it had the same goals as the Mexican Revolution: “social justice and economic progress within the framework of individual freedom and political liberty.”<sup>108</sup> And finally, the statement “expressed [the Presidents’] determination, with the scientific studies as a basis, to reach a permanent and effective solution at the earliest possible time with the aim of preventing the recurrence of this problem after October, 1963.”<sup>109</sup>

The next day, before his departure, the Kennedys visited the *Basílica de la Virgen de Guadalupe*, Mexico’s most cherished national symbol, one seemingly transcending class, Catholic observance, and politics, despite the PRI’s strained official relationship to the Catholic Church. The mass, which was Kennedy’s own idea, would today be called a public relations coup. Four thousand people crowded the pews at the mass, while 250,000 more stood in the enormous plaza outside. Seeing the Kennedys kneel in prayer before la Virgen cemented their famous personal touch and the genuine feelings of affection and good will that the visit had inspired.

In the wake of the visit, U.S. officials marveled at the overwhelming response to the Kennedys shown by the Mexican people. But they recognized with even greater clarity that the salinity problem had to be resolved to Mexico’s satisfaction for the hemispheric objectives of isolating Castro and advancing the Alliance for Progress to be achieved. Kennedy himself wrote to an embassy staffer to express thanks for the well organized visit, and noted “I think it is important that we follow through with vigor in attempting to work out

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<sup>108</sup> John F. Kennedy: "Joint Statement following Discussions With President Lopez Mateos.," June 30, 1962. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8751>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



the matters which seemed to be uppermost in their minds, such as saline water.”<sup>110</sup> A month later, Ambassador Mann sent a summary of the visit’s consequences to the Department of State. The visit had warmed relations between the two countries, he wrote, and the “Communist failure to mar the Kennedys’ visit has underlined the splits and weaknesses within the Mexican Communist movement, and has caused the Communists perceptible discomfort.”<sup>111</sup> But, Mann warned, this did not necessarily mean that the Mexican government would take a more openly anti-Communist stance. “The extent to which basic United States-Mexican relations will be improved as a result of the visit will depend to a considerable degree on the extent to which satisfactory solution can be found to the problems discussed by the two Presidents, especially to the problem of salt water in the Mexicali valley [sic] and to the Chamizal dispute.” Moreover, he cautioned, the Mexican government was no more willing to change its policy towards Cuba because of the visit.<sup>112</sup>

To the White House’s chagrin, even the Soviet and Cuban press had noticed that Kennedy had not been able to convince Mexico to change its relations with Cuba. A Havana radio station “stressed U.S.-Mexican history in the most unfavorable light, from the time of the Mexican War and the loss of enormous territory up to the present, including the salinity of the Arizona run-off waters.”<sup>113</sup> The White House therefore recognized that it had much work still to do if it wished to keep alive the Mexican people’s affection for Kennedy.

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<sup>110</sup> John F. Kenney to Edwin Martin, Undated. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 General 7/62 – 10/62 and undated, Document 2.

<sup>111</sup> Airgram from Mann to Department of State, 13 September 1962. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 General 7/62 – 10/62 and undated, Document 16.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Foreign Radio and Press Reaction to the President’s Visit to Mexico. JFK, National Security Files – Trips and Conferences, Box 236; Folder: President’s Trip to Mexico 6/62 General 7/62 – 10/62 and undated, Documents 3a and 3b.

Since the first alfalfa plant had wilted in the Mexicali Valley to Air Force One's lift-off from Mexico City en route to Washington, it had taken less than a year for salinity to transform from a local agrarian issue into the fulcrum of Cold War relations between Cuba, the United States, and Mexico. Diplomatic efforts and technical proposals to resolve the issue had deadlocked over the interpretation of the 1944 Waters Treaty. The inability to find a prompt resolution to the problem had caused anger in Mexicali, inflaming local political tensions between the U.S.-linked cotton and financing industry, the PRI-affiliated civil society organizations, and Alfonso Garzón's Liga Agraria Estatal, whose oppositional stance and organizing prowess the former two feared but needed in order to draw wider attention to the salinity problem. The LAE's membership in the MLN, moreover, threatened to draw the salinity problem into an expanding crisis of legitimacy of the PRI government, inspired in part by the Cuban Revolution. While threatening PRI hegemony, this likewise enabled the Mexican government to apply the lever of the Cold War against the salinity, by making a U.S. resolution of the salinity problem a prerequisite to Mexico supporting the Alliance for Progress, distancing Cuba, and keeping domestic pro-Cuba mobilizing in check. By the end of June, 1962, salt had taken center stage in Mexico's Cold War.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Limits of Repression: Salinity and the Central Campesina Independiente**

In early August 1962, Alfonso Garzón Santibáñez found himself face to face with the Governor of Baja California, Eligio Esquivel, and two generals of the Mexican army. Over the past several weeks, Garzón had been publicly campaigning for election in Baja California's upcoming state elections at the head of a newly formed independent party whose self-proclaimed goal was to challenge the electoral dominance of the PRI. Amidst the furor the army had been mobilized to maintain order across the northern end of the state. Esquivel had called Garzón in for the meeting, and now the governor and the generals were accusing Garzón of agitation against the government. According to U.S. consular reports, the generals gave Garzón a choice: abandon his long-shot campaign and his political activism, or be "martyrized" like Rubén Jaramillo, an agrarian activist from Morelos who was murdered along with his family by the army only a few months before. Only in Garzón's case, the generals warned, he would be hung rather than shot.<sup>1</sup>

As this chapter details, Garzón lost the election campaign, but he did not quiet down his political activities. On the contrary, he escalated them, buoyed by the widespread unrest among Mexicalenses caused by the salinity problem and the economic uncertainty it wrought. By January of the 1963, Garzón had taken his place at the head of a new national agrarian organization, the Central Campesina Independiente (Independent Peasants Central, CCI), which explicitly challenged the PRI and its affiliated agrarian group the Confederación

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<sup>1</sup> Recent Developments – Garzón and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional", 24 September 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

Nacional Campesina. Only months after the CCI's founding, the group was running a candidate for President who was also a member of the Partido Comunista Mexicano.

This trajectory raises questions about the relationship between the government of Mexico, the work of leftists activists and political groups like Garzón and the CCI, and the instability caused by the salinity problem. How was Garzón able to continue and escalate his political activities, in spite of repression – even death threats – against him? Why did the Mexican government not kill Garzón when he defied the threat, or at the very least, why did it not smother his political activities with repression as it did so routinely with other rebellious political groups? How did the salinity problem affect the political dynamic between the CCI and the PRI?

No one has charted the influence of early 1960s Mexican leftist groups better than Renata Keller. In her book *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* and article “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico's Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969,” Keller argues that the Mexican government's close diplomatic relations with Cuba were calculated to outflank the leftists who challenged the PRI's Revolutionary legitimacy by comparing its failures to Cuba's successes.<sup>2</sup> A key part of her argument is that Mexican government officials “feared” the influence of leftists who rallied in support of the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s. In her words, the primary driver of Mexico's foreign policy to Cuba was “Mexican leaders' deep-seated, paranoid fear of the domestic left.”<sup>3</sup> Fed a constant stream of exaggerated or false intelligence briefings, she argues, the Mexican government overestimated the strength of leftist groups and

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<sup>2</sup> Renata Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico's Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969,” *Latin American Research Review* 47, no. 2 (2012): 100–119; Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, “A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption.”

responded by embracing Cuba and unleashing increasingly violent repression that by the early 1970s had become a Dirty War.

Without attempting to historically psychoanalyze Mexican leaders, I argue in this chapter that their fear of domestic leftists was not as deep-seated as Keller asserts, nor did they overestimate the groups influence. Keller's analysis focuses on the ideological pronouncements of leftists, but it does not delve into the local context and issues that guided their activities and won them influence among rank-and-file group members, such as, in the case of the CCI, the salinity problem. A focus on salinity compels a reassessment of the Mexican government's fears of the CCI and of Garzón.

Mexican leaders' worries about leftists were complicated. As this chapter will show, Garzón and groups like the MLN and CCI never posed an existential threat to the PRI. Their numbers were too small and their ideology too narrowly focused to win widespread appeal. Most of all, government repression, by methods from mundane to violent, was extremely effective at limiting the groups' influence and ability to carry out day-to-day activities, let alone major demonstrations or the guerrilla insurgencies Keller claims the government feared.<sup>4</sup> With some exceptions, officials in the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Embassy in Mexico recognized this, and the evidence indicates that President López Mateos and other Mexican officials knew it as well.

In the case of Garzón and the CCI, however, the PRI did harbor other concerns. What worried the government was not just the CCI's organizing prowess, but the way that the salinity problem gave the CCI wider influence and support, particularly among groups normally disposed to support the government and reject leftist, pro-Cuba rhetoric. Garzón's

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<sup>4</sup> Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 111.

activism, combined with unrest caused by the salinity problem, threatened to sow greater instability in Baja California, a state with a long independent streak that challenged the usual methods of PRI political coercion. The dissolved minerals in the water of the Colorado River, after all, could not be repressed. Thus while the PRI did not fear the CCI *per se*, it did worry that the continued existence of the salinity problem could give the CCI political traction that would weaken the government's strength in Baja California. The Mexican government used the CCI's activities and its own embrace of Cuba to pressure the United States to resolve the salinity problem.

This chapter charts the political activities of Alfonso Garzón and the ill-fated White House efforts to resolve the salinity problem from the summer of 1962 until the end of summer 1963. Rallying around the problem of salinity, Garzón won wider influence and, despite increasing government repression, began to foster connections between local unrest in Mexicali and the broader, national challenge of PRI dominance embodied by the MLN, most notably by co-founding the CCI. President Kennedy's efforts to resolve the salinity problem in Mexico's favor were stymied by opposition from Arizonans led by Senator Carl Hayden. Their obstruction caused disgust within Mexico, and by late summer 1963 Mexican government officials began to increase the pressure on the United States by threatening to unleash and endorse the anti-U.S., pro-Cuba leftist groups. The tactic achieved a last-minute deal to abate salinity over the winter.

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As 1962 wore on, Garzón's political activities in Mexicali increased in scope and intensity. Garzón mobilized to carve out local influence in Mexicali and to challenge the PRI at the national level. The popular unrest created by the salinity problem, and the PRI's

seeming inability to resolve the issue, gave greater traction to Garzón's activity. Soon after Kennedy departed Mexico following the June summit, Garzón attempted to win an electoral post in state elections in Baja California, leading to a rift with the PRI and a military crackdown. The dust-up caused considerable alarm in the Department of State, which feared that the incident foretold rising Communist influence along the border. It also concerned the PRI, because it opened a window for closer cooperation between Garzón and the MLN.

In April, the already-fraught relationship between the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, the CNC-affiliated agrarian organization, and the Liga Agraria Estatal, the independent group led by Garzón, became even frostier. The two groups clashed over who would be nominated for candidacy in the upcoming state elections, scheduled for August. The LAE had proposed a suite of candidates for local posts, and Garzón had publicly announced his ambition to run for *Presidente Municipal* (Municipal President, akin to Mayor) of Mexicali, but the CNC would not support his bid. They had their own candidate, Carlos Rubio Parra, and felt Garzón was trying to jump the intra-party line of succession.<sup>5</sup>

Opposed in Mexicali, Garzón travelled to Mexico to meet with Alfonso Corona del Rosal, the President of the Executive Committee of the PRI, in the hopes of circumventing the CNC's opposition. But Corona refused to meet him, and when the list of pre-candidates was announced, neither Garzón's nor the name of any of the LAE's other candidates was on it.<sup>6</sup> Following this slight, the LAE's second-in-command, Francisco Díaz Echerivel, travelled to Guadalajara and met with Braulio Maldonado, the combative former governor of Baja California who had founded the Liga Agraria in 1958 as a tool to defy the national PRI leadership that opposed him. Maldonado in turn set up a meeting for Echerivel with Lázaro

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<sup>5</sup> Report, 23 April 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-62, Bundle 1, Folio 86.

<sup>6</sup> DFS Report, 17 June 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-18-962, Bundle 1, Folio 92.

Cárdenas. Cárdenas, upon hearing about the problems facing Mexican farmers – the salinity problem foremost among them – encouraged the Liga Agraria to leave the PRI and join the organization that best represented its interests.<sup>7</sup>

After Díaz returned to Mexicali, Garzón announced that the Liga Agraria Estatal was officially leaving the ranks of the PRI and that he would challenge the PRI candidate for Municipal President of Mexicali, backed by the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional. He claimed that the Liga had already collected over a thousand PRI membership cards from its members, and would collect many more to send them in protest to President López Mateos, “in his capacity as First Member of the PRI”. Campesino families were disgusted, he said, and warned that “the Party’s strength does not come from its initials [*siglas*] but from its members, such as the ejidatorios and other groups that form the Liga, and who form the majority of the citizenry in the Districts” in question.<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of Kennedy’s visit, Garzón announced further details. He was campaigning under a newly founded political party called the *Partido Revolucionario de Electores Libres* (Revolutionary Party of Free Electors), which soon changed its name to the *Alianza de Electores Libres* (Alliance of Free Electors). The party had the backing of the Liga Agraria Estatal and the MLN. In addition to Garzón’s bid for Municipal President, the Alianza was running candidates for *Diputado Local* (Local Deputy, akin to state congressperson) in the electoral districts of Mexicali city and the Mexicali Valley.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, even before this meeting the Liga Agraria Estatal’s official letterhead carried – along with an emblem depicting Emiliano Zapata – the following quote attributed to Lázaro Cárdenas: “Campesino: si la organización a la que perteneces no defiende tus intereses, abandónala” (Campesino: If the organization to which you belong does not defend your interests, abandon it). The similarity to the events described here may be a coincidence; it is also possible that the meeting with Cárdenas was embellished or invented by Díaz – or the DFS agent who reported it.

<sup>8</sup> “Cuando Alfonso Garzón se separó del PRI,” *La Voz de la Frontera*, February 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Report, 27 June 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 7, Folio 48.



The Alianza de Electores Libres's platform was dominated by the demand to end the salinity problem and pay reparations to Mexicali farmers. It also denounced the repression of workers, farmers and leaders who opposed the PRI, citing the assassination of the agrarian leader and MLN member Rubén Jaramillo, killed along with his family by the army the previous month in Morelos. It also criticized exploitative concessions granted to foreigners and foreign companies. Most of all, as Francisco Díaz Echerivel announced at the Alianza's founding meeting, the party represented "a criticism of the political imposition of the PRI, that the bourgeoisie in power and the Party had become an Electoral Agency in the service of personal interests instead of the masses."<sup>10</sup> The Alianza's efforts to register as a political party failed, as the deadline for registration had already passed (although it is doubtful its registration would have been permitted), but Garzón would run anyway despite Mexican law's prohibition on write-in candidates.

Garzón's candidacy raised concerns in both the Mexican and U.S. governments that the problem of salinity was fueling a serious threat to the PRI regime. In July, the commander of the Second Military District, comprising northern Baja California, General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz, wrote a long report to the Secretary of National Defense on the activities of the Alianza de Electores Libres and its connections with the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional and the problem of Colorado River salinity. The two groups, Cuenca wrote, were covers for an attempted Communist takeover. The MLN, he wrote, "has a marked extreme-left tendency, intimately connected with the Communist-Castroist Movement with the aims said doctrine has indicated for Hispanoamerica."<sup>11</sup> The MLN's goal, he wrote, was to gain followers and to challenge the PRI in the presidential election the

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<sup>10</sup> Report, 30 June 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-962, File 1, Folio 93.

<sup>11</sup> Cuenca Díaz to Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, 18 July 1962. AGN, Galería 2, Box 1475A, File 27, Folios 3-10.

following year. “Towards that end,” he wrote, “they have been exploiting for their benefit the problem facing the region, without an immediate solution, such is the case of the salinity of the waters of the Colorado River affecting the irrigation of the Mexicali Valley.”<sup>12</sup> The MLN was not registered to run in the upcoming state elections, but was supporting Garzón and the Alianza de Electores Libres so as to foment opposition to the ruling party and cultivate followers for a presidential electoral challenge the following year. Concluding the report, Cuenca wrote that the MLN’s “leaders will suffer a serious setback that would lose them many followers in the region, with the definitive solution of the Colorado waters problem, which constitutes their main reason for gaining followers.” In starker terms, he warned that the actions of disaffected PRI members had been allowed to get out of hand, and warned that “he will not hesitate to take measures...maintaining his troops alert and ready to respond to an emergency situation, which the advance of the aforementioned movement might incite, with the objective of maintaining order and calm in this jurisdiction.”<sup>13</sup> Cuenca’s message could not have been clearer. Garzón’s candidacy was part of a much broader threat – an attempted Communist takeover of the PRI using the Colorado salinity problem as a rallying cause to gain supporters angry at the government.

The U.S. Consul in Tijuana, Kennedy Crockett, saw the Alianza de Electores Libres in an even more threatening light. In a lengthy, hyperbolic telegram to the Department of State that could have come straight out of a Hollywood spy thriller, Crockett warned that Garzón’s candidacy was party of an elaborate ploy to implant the MLN in politics in Baja California, as the first step in an effort to challenge for the presidency in 1964. As Kennedy pointed out, the unrest caused by the salinity problem had helped to make Garzón’s

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

campaign possible: “The Colorado River salinity issue provided a ready-made opportunity for such a maneuver.” He theorized that Governor Eligio Esquivel and former governor Braulio Maldonado had a secret pact with the MLN to exclude Garzón from the PRI ticket, thus convincing him to run independently. Since write-in candidates were illegal, Garzón’s campaign was merely a ploy: the MLN, Crockett said, would “call off” Garzón if the PRI made Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Lázaro’s son and an MLN leader, the manager of the Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado. From there he could ascend to the state governor’s office, perhaps the presidency; preventing it would require massive, politically damaging repression, for as Crockett put it, “Leaders can be placated, the masses are not so readily subject to manipulation.”<sup>14</sup>

While the telegram’s cloak-and-dagger tone raised some eyebrows, the Department of State took it seriously. The Department of State advised Ambassador Mann to speak directly to López Mateos, and tell him that Cárdenas’s “appointment would complicate our strong efforts [to] resolve [the] salinity problem, which [is] already [a] sensitive issue”.<sup>15</sup> Mann did so, and shortly thereafter, López Mateos summoned Lázaro Cárdenas for a private meeting at *Los Pinos*, the presidential residence. Soon after, Cuauhtémoc reportedly disavowed any intention to seek the directorship of the Distrito de Riego.<sup>16</sup>

Quite apart from the ambassador’s furtive intervention, however, Garzón’s candidacy had alarmed the PRI leadership. Prior to the election, the army mobilized in the Mexicali

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<sup>14</sup> An example of Crockett’s paranoid style: “The game, if it can be called that given the dangerous gambles involved, has been extremely difficult to follow even for experienced native players, because the pawns utilized are humanly motivated and capable of independent and erratic moves, beyond the exact control of those who seek to manipulate them.” Kennedy Crockett to Department of State: Has the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Chosen Baja California as the Beachhead for Its Campaign Against the Partido Revolucionario Institucional? 19 July 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81. The report can be read online at <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB124/>>, Document 18.

<sup>15</sup> Department of State to U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 2 August 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, 8 August 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

Valley, patrolling intersections, city streets, and polling places during the course of the elections. As described at the beginning of the chapter, Governor Eligio Esquivel and two army commanders, General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz and General Agustín Carreño, called Garzón in for a meeting and to “*leerle la cartilla*” (literally “read him the booklet,” i.e. read him the riot act, lay down the law), accusing him of agitation against the local and federal government and demanding he confess his intentions. According to a later U.S. consular report, the generals gave a choice: “either quieting down and fading into the background or... becoming a national martyr along with Rubén Jaramillo” with “the assurance that in his case, he would be martyred by hanging rather than simply being shot.”<sup>17</sup> Garzón replied that he was merely obeying the wishes of the LAE’s members, and that while he would never agitate against the government, he would continue to denounce the PRI’s imposition of candidates.<sup>18</sup>

Garzón lay low during the election and there were no major disturbances. Many voters, however, complained of irregularities. Alianza supporters wrote to López Mateos that “there was an enormous deployment of police forces and the National Army, who violated the State Electoral Law, carrying guns at the polls, pressuring citizens not to vote for independent candidates and finally stealing the ballot boxes from those areas where the majority of citizens favored the mentioned [independent] candidates.”<sup>19</sup> As expected, the PRI candidates won; the Alianza de Electores Libres did not gain a single position.

Besides Cuenca’s and Crockett’s reports, it should be noted, I found no other concrete evidence that Garzón’s candidacy was part of an elaborate plot to position the MLN in national power. The MLN did support Garzón; the LAE, after all, was a founding

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<sup>17</sup> Recent Developments – Garzón and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional”, 24 September 1962. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>18</sup> DFS Report, 5 July 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-962, Bundle 1, Folio 103.

<sup>19</sup> Ejido and Colonia Representatives to Adolfo López Mateos, 11 August 1962. Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California (Henceforth AHEBC), Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Box 305, File 3.

organization of the Movement. No other evidence shows that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas hoped to use Garzón to infiltrate Baja California's government (the absence of evidence, of course, not necessarily being evidence of absence). What is both knowable and significant about the reports, however, is that Ambassador Mann and the Department of State gave them credence and acted upon it. Even more significantly, they indicated how the salinity problem had given the MLN and other pro-Cuba groups a platform to challenge the PRI government.

Indeed, another consular report out of Tijuana after the election reflected on the explosive combination of the salinity problem and the PRI's heavy-handed response to political opposition. On the one hand, the report stated, the PRI's hold on power was rock-solid: "The military has always stated with vigor that outbursts of violence at any time will not be tolerated"; Garzón could be "taken care of at any time as necessary." The salinity problem, moreover, was a genuine local concern, not merely a "ready-made opportunity" for secret communist maneuvers. Mexicalenses were angry and restive because the salinity was threatening their livelihoods, and the inability so far of the PRI to win a resolution to the problem made them seek new options in government: "while salinity may be the bay issue, the desire for self-expression in political affairs should not be overlooked as a real basis for the current agitation. It appears that people want greater expression within the PRI and if not satisfied will form their own splinter parties. They don't want to be told that they will accept candidates and issues without question." Nonetheless, when conflict arises, "the PRI will always win... it is the Government's party and it must win, that the alternative is Revolution."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> From Joseph A. Cicala, "Campaign of Agitation Conducted by Garzonistas", August 24, 1962. University of Arizona Libraries Digital Collections, Stewart L. Udall Papers – Colorado River; Az 372 Box 164, Folder 2.

Garzón, for his part, seemed unfazed by the failure of the Alianza, the military's oversight of the election, or the death threats against him. Only a week after the election, he was driving his truck across the Valley, visiting ejido after ejido, asking ejidatorios to hand over their voting receipts, with which he hoped to prove that the election results were fraudulent and the Alianza had won the vote. The PRI regional committee in turn sent out brigades to convince voters *not* to give up their voting slips, and in the end, only a few handed them over.<sup>21</sup> The next day, the police barred Garzón entry to the *Salon Continental*, the hall where the Liga Agraria Estatal Customarily met. Instead he held a meeting at a local ejido, declaring that his "political" activities were over but that he would prove the election had been fraudulent. He closed the meeting with a familiar rallying call, denouncing the salinity problem, which he said had caused thousands of hectares of agricultural lands to be abandoned.<sup>22</sup>

The salinity problem underlay Garzón's next political move only a month later. In late September, at the height of the cotton harvest, Garzón and the LAE organized a general strike to protest the price being offered for cotton fiber and seed by the cotton firms of the Asociación Algodonera. While the price of cotton was the proximate cause for the strike, the DFS believed that the ultimate cause was the problem of salinity, which had reduced some farmers' harvests and caused financial uncertainty. The social tensions between cotton growers and the U.S.-affiliated cotton industry further complicated the problem, as did the participation of MLN members in the strike, and the problem was only resolved with the involvement of the President's office. As the strike demonstrated, the salinity problem was

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<sup>21</sup> DFS Report, 13 August 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-162, Bundle 7, Folio 77.

<sup>22</sup> DFS Report, 15 August 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 7, Folio 70.

increasing Garzón's influence despite repression while offering the MLN an avenue into local Baja California politics.

The strike erupted from the tensions inherent in Mexicali's agricultural economy. An uneasy triangle of mutual dependence and mistrust existed between the U.S.-dominated cotton-buying and processing industry, the Mexican government, and cotton growers. (Cotton growers, meanwhile, had their own tensions, between those loyal to the PRI in the CNC-affiliated Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, those critical of the PRI in the Liga Agraria Estatal, which held the majority of the Valley's ejidatorios, and the colono-dominated Unión Agrícola Regional which generally split its loyalties between the other two). Much of the tension derived from the fact that U.S.-owned corporations dominated Mexicali's cotton economy. The firms in the Asociación Algodonera financed and purchased around 95% of the cotton grown in Mexicali – the Compañía Industrial Jabonera, an Anderson Clayton affiliate, alone financed more than 30% of the Valley's acreage. The loans stipulated that the borrower deliver their crop to the company that issued the loan. Yet fluctuations in the market price for cotton between the loan and the harvest could leave a farmer in debt to the company. Moreover, the Asociación Algodonera set prices for cotton as a bloc, reducing competition and, in the farmers' view, imposing harsh terms that benefitted the industry while leaving farmers with all of the risk. Resentment mixed with nationalism, and many farmers, particularly those in the LAE, saw the Asociación Algodonera's influence as counter-revolutionary.

The Mexican government both relied on and resented the influence of the Asociación Algodonera. On the one hand, the government's underfunded Ejidal Bank did not have the money to fill the Asociación's role as chief agrarian lender in Mexicali. The Asociación

filled the Distrito de Riego's budgetary gaps and subsidized irrigation through its program of well construction, which dwarfed that of the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos. But, as detailed in Chapter 1, the availability of private loans undermined the government's ability to use agrarian credit to foment political loyalty by denying loans to defiant farmers.

The proximate cause of the September strike organized by Garzón was the price set by the Asociación Algodonera for the price of cotton fiber and seed, which farmers felt was too low. But the Dirección Federal de Seguridad reported that the salinity problem was the ultimate cause. The salinity had reduced some farmers' cotton harvests drastically and reduced the overall quality of the cotton fiber they produced. Moreover, it had brought a generalized unease and slow-down to the Valley, as the Asociación Algodonera had restricted its terms for credit and sent ripples through the economy. Moreover, it had helped foment a sense of anger and, more practically, an organizational prowess among farmers. Repeated protests over the salinity the previous winter had allowed the LAE and other groups to become well practiced at organizing protests, demonstrations, and encampments.<sup>23</sup> While the Liga Agraria Estatal led the strike, it was joined by the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias and the Unión Agrícola Regional. Alarming for the PRI, this unity suggested that the salinity problem might aid the spread of the radicalism of the LAE – and the MLN.

The strike began on September 20<sup>th</sup>, led by Alfonso Garzón and LAE member and Distrito de Riego engineer Emilio López Zamora. According to the DFS, in addition to the vast majority of cotton farmers, around 40% of the Valley's businesses joined the strike with rolling, temporary shutdowns. Concurrently, the LAE undertook a campaign to convince farmers to defy their financing contracts and deliver their harvest to the *Industrias Unidas de*

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<sup>23</sup> DFS Report, 22 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 98, Folio 7.



*California, S.A.*, a cotton company offering a higher price for fiber than the Asociación Algodonera. The Industrias Unidas was one of the few fully Mexican-owned companies in the Valley, and a small one – it financed only 0.62% of the Valley’s acreage.<sup>24</sup> It stood to benefit from the strike, by capturing a greater share of the cotton market.

On September 21, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Heberto Castillo, and Alonso Aguilar Monteverde of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional visited Mexicali to address the strikers. (Given the Consulate’s hyperbolic fears of a plot to insert Cárdenas into local power during the previous month’s election, his presence is notable, but I found no other archival evidence that it involved the plot described by Crockett) Cárdenas spoke to 600 strikers at the Industrias Unidas factory. He told them that the government’s censorship could not blind the MLN to the problems faced by Mexicali farmers, and invited them to join the group. “[Y]ou will be defending the interests of Mexico and helping free the country from the tutelage of Yankee Imperialism, which is the same fight for liberty that Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and our other fallen forefathers fought. Don’t listen to the enemies of our movement, who call us Communists.”<sup>25</sup> The police and army stood by.

Two days later, the Liga Agraria Estatal set up roadblocks across the Mexicali Valley. They stopped the trucks of farmers delivering cotton to the processing facilities and attempted to convince them to deliver their crops to the Industrias Unidas. The military soon arrived to dismantle the roadblocks, so the LAE moved to the Industrias Unidas facility, where, joined by members of the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias and the Unión Agrícola Regional, they flagged down passing trucks and encouraged them to sell their cotton to the Industrias Unidas. Soldiers guarded the encampment to keep order, and farmers who refused

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Stewart Udall to John F. Kennedy, 6 March 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

<sup>25</sup> DFS Report, 22 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 98, Folio 7.

to deliver their cotton to the Industrias Unidas were escorted away with military protection. Those who did sell their cotton to Industrias Unidas – around 90% of them, according to the DFS – had their name, license plate numbers, and other personal information recorded by the army.<sup>26</sup>

In the midst of the strike, four representatives of the Asociación Algodonera flew to Mexico City to meet with Julián Rodríguez Adame, the *Secretario de Agricultura y Ganadería* (Secretary of Agriculture and Livestock). Hector Sada, Ernesto Escandón, James Stone, and Travis Calvin met with Rodríguez at his home, then with *Sub-Secretario de Gobernación* (Sub-Secretary of Government) Luis Echeverría Álvarez at his home (who would be Secretario de Gobernación under President Díaz Ordaz and then president himself from 1970-1976), before being sent back to Rodríguez again. Hector Sada complained that they were being given the runaround with nothing being accomplished.<sup>27</sup> Over the following two days, joined by Esteban Jardon, the President of the *Unión de Productores de Algodón de la República Mexicano* (The Mexican Cotton Producers Union) and Francisco Aguilar Moreno, the General Secretary of the CNC in Mexicali, they met with Rodríguez Adame and Echeverría and then gave a press conference on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September. Sada said the cotton strike had been “a subversion of the legal order, started by a group of known agitators led by *Ing. López Zamora* and Alfonso Garzón.” They announced that the Asociación would pay \$800 pesos per ton of cottonseed – the price offered by the Industrias Unidas – as Echeverría had requested, in order to return peace to the Valley. Further, he blamed the Industrias Unidas for “trying to obtain unwarranted advantages, without participating with the

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<sup>26</sup> DFS Report, 23 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1962, Bundle 7, Folio 126.

<sup>27</sup> DFS Report, 25 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 118, Folios 7 and 126.

*campesinos* of the region or taking on the risks inherent in agricultural lending.”<sup>28</sup> The *Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería* announced that it would offer the Asociación conciliatory measures, such as a waiver in the price ceiling set on certain cotton by-products, and that the federal government would ensure order in the region.

Further details of the settlement reached Mexicali while Garzón was busy attempting to organize school boycotts and a cotton pickers’ strike. It was a mixed victory for the LAE. The Asociación Algodonera would pay the 800 pesos per ton for cottonseed that the strikers had demanded, and the price of fiber would be set by the highest bidder. In exchange, farmers would be obligated to sell their cotton to the company that financed their agrarian credit. However, when Julián Rodríguez Adame arrived in Mexicali to oversee the resolution of the strike, he announced that he would not recognize or negotiate with Garzón or anyone associated with him, and would only allow members of the CNC to form a commission, requested by the strikers, in the local branch of the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal.<sup>29</sup> Yet the exclusion only underscored how much influence Garzón and the LAE carried in the Mexicali Valley. That influence, combined with the volatility arising from the salinity problem, severely threatened the PRI’s hold on local political stability.

Garzón’s radicalism got him into deeper trouble. In early November, LAE second-in-command Francisco Díaz Echerivel announced plans for the inaugural congress of a new national agrarian organization, the *Central Campesina Independiente*, which would be held in Mexico City in January. The group would be outside of the PRI, Díaz said, and would mobilize in favor of farmers, *campesinos*, and agrarian issues.<sup>30</sup> State governor Eligio

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<sup>28</sup> DFS Report, 27 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 144, Folio 7.

<sup>29</sup> DFS Report, 29 September 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 7, Folio 166.

<sup>30</sup> DFS Report, 5 November 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 7, Folio 276.

Esquivel met with Garzón and other LAE members a few days later and warned them that “any demonstrations or disorder would be admonished right away and if they insisted in participating in meetings or acts against the Federal or State regimes, they would be detained and sanctioned.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the warning, a few days later Garzón led more protests when some of the cotton companies refused to pay the price for cottonseed that the Secretaría de Agricultura had imposed in the solution to the cotton strike.

Garzón announced that the next day, November 20<sup>th</sup>, the LAE would hold a parade in Mexicali to commemorate the Mexican Revolution and to protest the agrarian problems of the Mexicali Valley, including the cotton buyers’ unwillingness to uphold their end of the bargain.<sup>32</sup> Quickly, Julián Rodríguez Adame and Governor Esquivel intervened with the cotton companies to compel them to pay the price they had agreed to. The next day, the army blocked the LAE’s parade route. The protesters regrouped at the Ejido Islas Agrarias, but the military followed them there. Garzón and seven other LAE members were arrested. The police claimed to have found an unregistered pistol in Garzón’s truck, and accused the detainees of being MLN members and communists.<sup>33</sup> They charged them with the crimes of social dissolution (a catch-all crime of dissent and a classic tool of repression against PRI opponents), unlawful association, resisting arrest [*resistencia de particulares*] and possession of a firearm. At his arrest hearing, Garzón denied that the LAE was part of the MLN, saying none of their banners had ever proclaimed the association. He also said he was Catholic, perhaps to defend against accusations that he was a communist.<sup>34</sup> After almost two weeks in jail, a judge ordered Garzón and the LAE members released, their charges dropped.

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<sup>31</sup> DFS Report, 14 November 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 8, Folio 8.

<sup>32</sup> DFS Report, 16 November 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-962, Bundle 8, Folio 18.

<sup>33</sup> DFS Report, 23 November 1962. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-62, Bundle 8, Folio 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Seemingly undeterred, the LAE began the final preparations for the founding congress of the new national agrarian organization, the Central Campesina Independiente.

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While Garzón had a busy fall in Mexicali, President Kennedy attempted to broker a resolution to the salinity problem within the United States. He had promised at the Mexico City summit to keep salinity low over the coming winter and to resolve the problem by October 1963. The United States Bureau of Reclamation had planned to release extra water over the winter to scour sediment deposits from the riverbed. The pulse of extra flow would also help to dilute the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk, keeping Mexicali's water to below 1500 ppm of salinity. Kennedy also gave the Bureau the task of studying the salinity issue and making recommendations for a resolution in time to meet the October 1963 deadline.<sup>35</sup>

Kennedy's intentions were subverted, however, by Arizona Senator Carl Hayden. Hayden was the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. When the bill to authorize and fund the Bureau's study came before the committee in November, Hayden inserted language that prohibited the Bureau from studying any solution that would diminish or stop the operations of the Wellton-Mohawk project, entail a canal to by-pass the water from Wellton-Mohawk to Morelos Dam or the Gulf of California, or give Mexico more water than the 1944 Treaty granted.<sup>36</sup> The White House scrambled to have the restriction removed, but to no avail. As a State Department memorandum put it, "Senator Hayden's position is one of adamant opposition to any solution that would under any circumstances furnish Mexico with Colorado River water in excess of its treaty entitlement, while

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<sup>35</sup> Department of State, 1 November 1962. SRE, Fondo CILA, Folder C-133-1, Folios 1-3.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum for Ralph Dungan, 1 November 1962. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

“Reclamation institutionally has had little sympathy for the Mexican position.”<sup>37</sup> The changes were accepted and the appropriations were granted. Before it had even begun, in other words, the USBR study had been doomed to fail, or at least fail Mexico.

Word of Hayden’s obstruction reached Mexico, causing anger and disgust. Baja California Senator Gustavo Vildósola wrote Hayden a blistering letter in protest. Responding to Hayden’s oft-repeated belief that the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk would be usable if Mexico had better infrastructure, Vildósola wrote that “you have the magnificent opportunity to suggest to your government that instead of sending the salty water from Wellton to Baja California, where because of our poverty and ignorance we don’t know how to use it for agriculture, it be sent to the irrigation districts in Arizona and California where, as you yourself say, the farmers are capable of achieving success with waters of that quality.”<sup>38</sup> He suggested that Hayden could improve relations between the two countries by stopping the pumping at Wellton-Mohawk, but that “it appears that you have the goal of causing relations between the U.S. and Mexico to regress to historical times we thought we had left behind, when the politics of the garrote and the dollar determined the fate of weaker countries.”<sup>39</sup> To David Herrera Jordán, the CILA commissioner, Vildósola lamented that “not only has there been no step towards a definitive and permanent solution... but the U.S. Senate has dictated terms against the farmers of the Mexicali Valley and harmful to the dignity and sovereignty of Mexico, because allowing our fields to be irrigated with waters

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Vildósola to Hayden, 1 November 1962. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-1, Folios 4-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

that spoil their fertility is equivalent to losing a part of the national territory... You know that our farmers are not able to withstand indefinitely... this aggression.”<sup>40</sup>

It seemed there was little Mexico could do, however, except wait for the Bureau’s recommendations and hope for the best. The Mexican government had often threatened to take the salinity issue to an international tribunal such as the World Court if negotiations failed. Yet Mexican officials privately admitted that their legal case was not as strong as they liked to claim. In December 1962 a legal advisor to the Secretariat of Foreign Relations named José Rojas Garcidueñas reported that the CILA almost completely lacked documentary evidence to prove damages caused by the saline water. They held only a handful of testimonies from farmers whose crops had been lost when they had stopped irrigating with salty water in the winter of 1961-1962, and had had to replant at great expense. But this evidence was weak, and, as Rojas pointed out, could be construed not as evidence that the saline water was harmful, but that *not* using it had been harmful.<sup>41</sup>

Irregularities in the administration of the Distrito de Riego complicated the process of proving damages caused by salt. Rojas Garcidueñas noted cases where a farmer with rights to irrigate 18 hectares, for example, irrigated 36 Ha by illegally buying other farmers’ water rights or even by bribing the technicians who manned the irrigation canals’ control gates – the kind of corruption that helped spark the water price protest.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, pinpointing the cause of poor harvests or damaged crops was virtually impossible, as not just salinity but the type of plant, volume of irrigation water, soil profile, soil drainage, and irrigation timing all affected crop outcomes – not to mention weather conditions, fertilizer, herbicide and

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<sup>40</sup> Vildósola to Herrera Jordán, 20 February 1963. SRE, Fondo Cila, File C-133-2, Folios 60-62.

<sup>41</sup> Rojas Garcidueñas to SRE, 3 December 1962. SRE, Fondo CILA, Folder C-133-1, Folios 114-120.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

pesticide use, and the presence or absence of pests. Rojas Garcidueñas thus recommended that the government begin experiments and surveys to collect such proof in case Mexico did go to an international court. But the Distrito de Riego, and even the CILA, seemed ill-equipped to collect such extensive data. When the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias sent a petition to the SRE claiming 300 million pesos of damages to its members' plots, Foreign Minister Manuel Tello asked them to send a copy of their proof, as it could help Mexico argue its case (a reply which, of course, could easily have been a polite way of dismissing their claim).<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, while farmers reported crop losses and the salinization of thousands of hectares of land, the 1962 cotton harvest broke all records for size and quality. This fact was seized upon by Arizonan, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Department of the Interior to dismiss Mexico's complaints about the salinity issue. As Stewart Udall wrote to Jerome Wiesner, one of the President's science and technology advisors, "[t]here currently is a flourishing agricultural enterprise in the Mexicali Valley. Crop records for the past year, and certainly crop appearances at the present time, show no evidence of crop loss or damage from this problem."<sup>44</sup> Mexican officials and farmers scrambled to explain this awkward fact. James W. Stone, an American-born executive at la Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, protested that while the crop had been the biggest in Mexicali's history, salt still threatened the Valley as a whole. He explained to the newspaper *Excelsior* that the harvest had been extremely uneven from plot to plot. Those farmers whose lands had not been salinized, who irrigated with well water instead of river water, whose plots had been leveled by the Distrito de Riego (perfectly flat fields prevent runoff and therefore maximize

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<sup>43</sup> Tello to Javier Rojo Gómez, 23 January 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, Folder C-133-2, Folio F35.

<sup>44</sup> Udall to Jerome B. Wiesner, 15 May 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.



irrigation efficiency), and by farmers who had the financial resources to use better fertilizers, pesticides and equipment, had harvested enormous crops, aided by unusually good weather.<sup>45</sup> But those farmers whose plots were irrigated with river water, who had unlevelled fields or lacked the resources to buy fertilizers, had produced disappointing crops. The harvest would have been even more enormous, Stone said, if it had not been for the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk.

Many in the United States remained skeptical of Mexico's claims and of the motivations of the protest movement in Mexicali. While the San Diego *Union* pointed out that the October 1963 deadline for a solution to the problem coincided with the beginning of Mexico's election cycle, noting that "the threat was implicit that if something is not done in advance of the Mexican equivalent of the primary elections, Colorado River quality will become a hot issue between the two countries," others doubted the nature of the apparent Communist agitation in Mexicali.<sup>46</sup> Flipping the notion that the salinity problem was pushing Mexicalenses into the open arms of communists, they theorized that the salinity problem was a myth that had been invented by communists in order to secure Mexico more water than the treaty permitted.

Senator Barry Goldwater, for example, said "I think this is an example of communist propaganda among the farmers in the new state of Baja California," a ploy to get more water from the United States: "Frankly, I think we gave them too much in the beginning."<sup>47</sup> The Calexico *Chronicle*, which reported Goldwater's statement, dismissed it as typical of Arizona's greed for water ("when it comes to water rights if you are from Arizona you are

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<sup>45</sup> "Urge Solucionar el Caso de la sal en Mexicali," *Excelsior*, 8 February 1963.

<sup>46</sup> "U.S. Vows Accord in Mexico Salt Rift," *San Diego Union*, 29 November 1962.

<sup>47</sup> "words, words..." *Calexico Chronicle*, 20 December 1962.

either for me, a Communist, or a Californian”), but it did admit that there was more to the protest movement in Mexicali than simply Castro-style communist infiltration. “Without doubt, the lefties have made capital out of the problem, and will continue to do so until the problem is solved. [But] the original committee that launched the issue south of the represented the wealthiest, the most conservative elements in the Mexicali Valley... the bloody capitalists.”<sup>48</sup> This summation was fairly astute: the Comité de Defensa, which had organized the original protests against salinity in the autumn of 1961, had been coordinated and bankrolled by the Asociación Algodonera, even though the Comité had also united Alfonso Garzón and the LAE.

Some of those capitalists attempted to walk a fine line between downplaying the notion of salinity as a communist plot and emphasizing the threat to stability and prosperity that the salinity represented. Bill Blackledge, of La Jabonera, and Rafael Martínez Retes, who headed the Comité de Defensa and represented the Asociación Algodonera, explained to the San Diego *Union* that “Subversive elements have used the problem as the pretext for agitation and anti-American demonstrations.” But they also warned that “There are many Mexican farmers who won’t pay their financing amounts this year.”<sup>49</sup> Blackledge and Martínez attempted to downplay the communist danger while still warning that the salinity problem threatened peace and stability.

Dramatic events at the beginning of 1963, however, had made the question of communism in Baja California more urgent. In the first week of January, the Central Campesina Independiente held its inaugural congress in Mexico City. The group’s founding was one of the most significant political events of the early 1960s. As Keller writes, it

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “Mexicans Harvest Record Cotton Crop,” *San Diego Union*, 3 March 1963.

“sparked a nationwide uproar”, reflecting “the fear that the group inspired.”<sup>50</sup> Conceived as a challenge to the PRI-affiliated Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), the group shared ideological parallels and members with the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional. Like that group, the CCI was envisioned as an umbrella group that would unite various local agrarian organizations across the country to mobilize for their interests and for *reforma agraria integral* – a “complete” agrarian reform, meaning not just the distribution of land, but the provision of agricultural credit, irrigation water and drainage, fertilizer and supplies, education, health, and social services, and robust markets for agricultural goods. The overlap in membership between the MLN and the CCI, including some organizers, led many observers to believe that the CCI was a part of the MLN, or had been formed by it. The MLN claimed that it approved of and supported the CCI, and held many of the same goals, but the two remained officially independent.<sup>51</sup> Unlike the MLN, the CCI focused specifically on agrarian issues, and favored direct action over the MLN’s more symbolic rallies. As its critics pointed out, it had higher proportion of Communist Party members in leadership positions and took a more communist-sympathetic stance.<sup>52</sup>

The inaugural congress mimicked the MLN’s from 1961. Over 1000 people attended, from all across the country, according to the DFS agents who infiltrated the meeting. Lázaro Cárdenas, accompanied by his son Cuauhtémoc, opened proceedings with a speech supporting the group’s mission, but, unlike with the MLN, declined to join its national executive committee. The executive, besides Alfonso Garzón, included Braulio Maldonado and the Partido Comunista de México members Arturo Orona and Ramón Danzós Palomino,

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<sup>50</sup> Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War*, 112 and 116.

<sup>51</sup> DFS Report, 10 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 66.

<sup>52</sup> “Communist” in 1960s Mexico could mean variously a non-Party affiliated leftist outside of the PRI, a member of the Partido Comunista Mexicano, or a generalized derogative term. Barry Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

who were agrarian organizers from the Comarca Lagunera, an important cotton-growing region between Durango and Coahuila where the Partido Comunista Mexicano had particularly strong influence among ejidatorios. Over the three days of the congress, all gave long speeches attacking the PRI, *charrismo* (“bought” unions, whose corrupt leaders accepted bribes in exchange for cooperation), the imposition of political candidates, the influence of U.S. “imperialism,” and the general abandonment by the PRI of the agrarian agenda of the Mexican revolution.<sup>53</sup>

Much like the MLN, the CCI was dedicated to reform that would revive the agrarian promises of the Mexican Revolution. But it was much more vocal in its criticism of the ruling party than the MLN had been. Arturo Orona declared that “the CCI raises the flag of Zapata, Villa, and Jaramillo, and we will correct the failures and errors of the Agrarian Reform and stop cheating those who work the land.”<sup>54</sup> In his speech, Garzón said that “the CCI maintains friendly relations with all of the country’s authorities and has the goal of denouncing bad functionaries to the *Señor* President of the Republic.” Farmers in Baja California, he went on, had been working independently of the CNC for years with better results than PRI-affiliated organizations, proving there was no need to join the official government groups.<sup>55</sup>

Many of the other speakers also invoked the tenets of the Mexican Revolution and criticized the PRI for failing to live up to them. One General Celestino Gasca gave a long speech declaring “the CCI will be neither instrument nor enemy of anyone; its founding is based in justice and reason for the majority of the people. Those who think this organization

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<sup>53</sup> DFS Report, 9 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 29.

<sup>54</sup> DFS Report, 8 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

will not satisfy the functionaries of the government are mistaken, as it will be a force to help the government solve the issues that it presents.”<sup>56</sup> He read a telegram of support from political prisoners including Fernando Arizpe, Filomena Mata, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Laura Garmendia de Vallejo read a letter from her imprisoned husband Demetrio Vallejo, one of the leaders of the 1958-59 railroad movement, in which he denounced Vicente Lombardo Toledano (who had withdrawn from the MLN, along with his Partido Popular Socialista, a few months after its founding in a public spat with Cárdenas) who had, apparently, opposed the founding of the CCI. Vallejo’s letter also denounced “the clergy, reactionaries, latifundistas, the nouveau riche.... *charros y charritos*” and said that the agrarian working class faced not only assassinations and police repression but juridical repression as well.<sup>57</sup> Enriqueta Cabrera, an LAE member, gave a speech in the name of the group’s women (while women were well represented in both groups, they rarely were given the chance to speak). The participation of women, she said, “has stood out in all the revolutions that have happened around the world, and we are ready to die in defense of our husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers”<sup>58</sup> Braulio Maldonado introduced the delegates to one Father Dávila, a priest who had been a colonel in Emiliano Zapata’s army, so that they “would realize that there were agrarian fighters and sympathizers even within the priesthood.”<sup>59</sup>

The tone of some of the speeches at the congress was more openly critical of the PRI than was usual at the time. Francisco Díaz Echerivel, the LAE second-in-command and former state diputado for Mexicali’s third district, 1959-1962, explained in his speech why he

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<sup>56</sup> DFS Report, 9 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> DFS Report, 10 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 66.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

had quit the Baja California state congress.<sup>60</sup> “When I was invited to work alongside the Government, I refused, and I told them that I will not form part of any Government that is an enemy of the people... because of those bad governors, we are here. I am a campesino and I have always militated in the Liga Agraria Estatal, to defend the interests of my *compañeros de clase* (class comrades) and for the same reason, we will form a new Central, the C.C.I, and I will not allow anyone to change our thinking.”<sup>61</sup> Another delegate, Salvador Capistran, proposed a national day of protests on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and warned that if the government had not enacted the group’s demands by then, “they will hear the first shots,” with protests in every state where the CCI had filial organizations.<sup>62</sup>

Such criticism, members knew, would not be taken lightly by the PRI. Perhaps for that reason, the decision to join the CCI created disagreement within the Liga Agraria Estatal. The Dirección Federal de Seguridad reported that “a large majority” of the LAE membership disagreed with the decision, believing the CCI would not be able to gain the critical mass of members to actually achieve its goals. Instead, they wanted to rejoin the CNC, believing working within the party would be more effective than working against it.<sup>63</sup> Francisco Díaz Echerivel was in charge of organizing the motorcade of LAE members that would drive from Mexicali to Mexico City to attend the CCI congress, and “was not able to hide his bad mood”, wrote the DFS, when only a dozen or so members showed up, not even filling the bus. In the end, about 300 LAE members joined Garzón and Díaz in Mexico City, but the

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<sup>60</sup> Díaz was named candidate for diputado the year after Garzón had created the Liga Agraria Estatal with Braulio Maldonado’s backing. But his combativeness and conflict with the PRI drew the ire of the other PRIista legislators. When the government stopped paying his monthly salary, he quit the legislature. “La Venganza - J. Jesús Blancornelas | La Crónica de Hoy,” accessed September 19, 2016, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2005/168964.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> DFS Report, 8 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 1, Folio 1.

<sup>63</sup> DFS Report, 8 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-963, Bundle 8, Folio 166.

DFS reported they were mostly unemployed day laborers and land-seekers.<sup>64</sup> It is likely an exaggeration that a “large majority” of LAE members disagreed with joining the CCI, as the group’s overall membership did not suffer. In any case, the decision to join the CCI was significant and represented an important escalation of the LAE’s dissenting position. Its members did not take it lightly.

The Mexican government, too, paid attention. The *New York Times* reported that the “formation of the campesino organization and its resultant debates have made it the most talked of political situation here in months, if not years.”<sup>65</sup> The head of the CNC, Javier Rojo Gómez, called an emergency meeting to discuss the founding of the CCI, as did the President of the PRI, Alfonso Corona del Rosal, summoning the party’s executive committee. A week after the congress, which had been subjected to government censorship and thus barely made the Mexican newspapers, President López Mateos announced an eight-point program to address agrarian issues, ordering state governors to expedite land claims and break up large estates. He promised that “not a single large tract of privately-owned land will be intact” by the end of his administration the following year.<sup>66</sup> The timing was no coincidence: as the U.S. embassy in Mexico reported to the Department of State, the “founding of [the] CCI [is the] most dangerous threat [in] recent years to PRI structure, ‘National Unity’ concept [the name of one of López-Mateos’s economic initiatives], and Lopez Mateos programs.”<sup>67</sup>

The CCI challenged the supremacy of the CNC, which tied the vast majority of the country’s rural people to the ruling party in a system of trickle-down clientelism. The CNC and its affiliated organizations secured votes for the PRI; in exchange its leaders got bribes,

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<sup>64</sup> DFS Report, 5 January 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-1963, Bundle 8, Folio 148.

<sup>65</sup> “Peon Land Drive Turns to Politics,” *New York Times*, 9 January 1963.

<sup>66</sup> “Mexico Promises to Slash Estates,” *New York Times*, 17 January 1963.

<sup>67</sup> Embassy to Rusk, 8 January 1963. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

privileges, and opportunities for upward mobility. The rank-and-file received increasingly modest benefits and increasingly token recognition in government policy. The corrupt system worked because there was no alternative to the CNC that could hope to match its size, reach, influence, or privileged position with the government. The CCI, by uniting the most stubborn independent agrarian organizations across the country, had the potential to rival the CNC's public stature and, through its activism and example, goad the ruling party to enact meaningful reforms.

Moreover, the CCI employed the same Revolutionary symbolism that both the PRI and the CNC used to claim legitimacy.<sup>68</sup> Part of the threat posed by the CCI to the ruling party was the potential to embarrass the government by embodying this Revolutionary ideal more robustly and directly. On paper, the CCI, the CNC and the PRI all had the same professed goals and claimed to represent the same Revolutionary tradition. In terms of ideology, there was no issue on which the CNC and the CCI disagreed. The only criticism the ruling party could level at the latter was that it was overrun with communists – something the DFS reported constantly and which the government repeated endlessly in the press (see illustration below). The difference would be in the execution, where the CCI's independence could highlight the government's failures and corruption.

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<sup>68</sup> G. M Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau maintain that the flexibility of this Revolutionary symbolic canon, which was used by the state and to criticize it, is one of the key hallmarks of Mexico's post-Revolutionary state. *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).





*“So... if joining the Central Campesina is a sin, do those in the CNC get indulgences?” Source: Museo de la Caricatura, Mexico City*

The explosive political potential of the LAE-CCI connection via salinity was demonstrated dramatically just a few weeks after the CCI's founding. In February, the Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado announced that it would move ahead with a long-planned increase to the price charged for irrigation water. The Mexicali Valley's farmers unanimously and intensely protested the decision, and the Valley was paralyzed by massive strikes and demonstrations that lasted for weeks. As in the September cotton strike, the Liga Agraria Estatal spearheaded and sustained the protests, even as all of the Valley's other agrarian organizations joined them. The uproar showed how the salinity problem had exacerbated the social, political, and economic tensions arising from the distribution of water and its techno-ecological basis.

The increase in prices had been two years in the making, and stemmed from the long process of re-organization of the Distrito de Riego. In 1955, Mexico for the first time received only its treaty amount of 1.5 million acre-feet, resulting in an enormous shortfall in available irrigation water. In response to demands from water users, the SRH and Distrito

began creating a registry of users (the Padrón de Usuarios) to take stock of the number of users and their irrigation rights, to better ration the available volume of water (see Chapter 1). The haphazard reorganization took a decisive step in 1961, with the expiry of the concession on the Álamo Canal held by the Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas de Baja California (which was owned by the Imperial Irrigation District). Up to that year, the Distrito's operations were split between the company, the SRH, and independent water users' associations, who had negotiated irrigation rights prior to or independently of the establishment of the Distrito. Because of this chaotic state of affairs, there was no unified price for irrigation water. The Distrito in fact charged 128 different prices, depending on the user, ranging from \$0.51 pesos per liter per second per 24 hours (L/s x 24hrs) up to \$5.71 pesos per L/s x 24hrs. In May 1961 the Distrito attempted to establish a uniform price, set at \$1.65 pesos per L/s x 24hrs for gravity water, and \$3.20 per L/s x 24hrs for well water, which, after protests, they reduced to \$2.50 per L/s x 24hrs, thanks to a \$9,000,000 peso subsidy from the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos – an amount representing 13% of the SRH's operating subsidies to irrigation districts nationwide.<sup>69</sup> Conditional on the reduction in pricing, however, was that it would be a temporary measure. The Distrito established a *Consejo Consultivo* (Advisory Council) charged with studying the operations of the district and establishing a price for water based on its real costs of operations for 1962. In July 1962 the Liga Agraria Estatal had sent an open letter to the state governor Eligio Esquivel and the Asociación Algodonera, asking that the increase be waived. Farmers already facing tighter credit and poor harvests as a result of the salinity problem could not afford to pay more for water, the letter argued.<sup>70</sup> The Unión

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<sup>69</sup> <sup>69</sup> "Asunto Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, Mexicali, B.C. - Cuotas de Agua" Dirección General de Distritos de Riego, SRH. AGN, Galería 2, Box 2957B, File 34.

<sup>70</sup> LAE to Esquivel and Asociación Algodonera, 9 July 1962. Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California (henceforth AHEBC), Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

Agrícola Regional voiced its support for the LAE's proposal.<sup>71</sup> Owing to the protests, the SRH repeated its subsidy, and the price stayed low for another year.

Facing a budget shortfall, the Distrito now proposed to raise the price of gravity water from \$1.65 pesos to \$2.50 pesos per L/s x 24hrs for farmers using more than 100 Liters per second; and to raise the price of groundwater from \$2.50 pesos to \$3.20 pesos per L/s x 24hrs for farmers using more than 100 Liters per second (those using less than that volume would pay the former rate). As Distrito officials attempted to explain, these prices remained far below the Distrito's operating costs.<sup>72</sup> The issue, however, was not just the price of water but the way the Distrito de Riego managed and distributed it. Farmers complained that the Distrito's manager, Oscar González Lugo, behaved erratically, alternating between despotism and ineptitude. For example, in October the Distrito denied irrigation water to a number of farmers who had already received agricultural credit and prepared their fields for planting, claiming that they were not registered on the Padrón de Usuarios.<sup>73</sup> But while the Distrito was denying small-plot ejidatorios their water, it was notoriously corrupt, providing water to colonos with hundreds of hectares above the 18 hectares permitted.<sup>74</sup>

Yet the price of water was only the proximate cause for the unrest. The underlying issue was that the salinity problem, and the way it had worsened the existing problems with the distribution of water in Mexicali. As Baja California Senator Gustavo Vildósola reported to the Secretario de Gobernación, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the "real cause of the conflict" was

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<sup>71</sup> UAR to LAE, 12 July 1962. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>72</sup> "Asunto Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, Mexicali, B.C. - Cuotas de Agua" Dirección General de Distritos de Riego, SRH. AGN, Galería 2, Box 2957B, File 34.

<sup>73</sup> LAE to González Lugo, 9 October 1962. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>74</sup> LAE to Adolfo López Mateos, 20 October 1962. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

the salinity problem.<sup>75</sup> It had led to an economic crisis, with some farmers losing their harvest to bad water, or losing their water completely. It had forced an increasing reliance on groundwater, which in turn had increased tensions between farmers with access to wells and those without. It had also illustrated the callous managerial style of the Distrito de Riego, which operated without the input and consideration of farmers.

So when the Distrito announced the price increase in February 1963, the response was swift. Agrarian groups, led by the Liga Agraria Estatal, sent a flurry of letters of protest to the Distrito and to political authorities. Garzón complained to Governor Esquivel that farmers would have no way of paying the higher price, especially up front, as the Distrito was now proposing to require. He reminded Esquivel that the current price, of \$1.65 pesos per liter per second per 24 hours (L/s x 24hr) had been agreed to on the condition that the Distrito undertake studies to evaluate the actual cost of irrigation and agriculture and adjust the price accordingly, and that these studies had not been undertaken.<sup>76</sup> Over 1600 farmers from 52 ejidos and colonias signed a letter sent to Alfredo del Mazo, the Secretary of Hydraulic Resources, demanding the price hike be cancelled. A price increase would be disastrous for farmers, they wrote, especially since “there currently exists an almost complete failure [of harvests] from the damages caused by salt contamination in the irrigation water.” Harvests had gotten worse in the preceding years. At the same time, farmers had faced “infinite problems” because of the inconsistent behavior of González Lugo, who had a lofty and snooty managerial style, rarely granting farmers’ requests for meetings. They demanded that

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<sup>75</sup> Vildósola to Díaz Ordaz, 25 February 1963. AGN, Galería 2, Box 1476B, File 18.

<sup>76</sup> Garzón to Esquivel, 13 February 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

the price for water remain the same, that González Lugo be fired, and that the farmers be granted representation within the Distrito de Riego.<sup>77</sup>

The Liga Agraria Estatal, with the collaboration of the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias and the Unión Agrícola Regional, then began a protest encampment in the plaza in front of the office of the Distrito de Riego in Mexicali city. 1500 farmers and their family members occupied the plaza during the day, with their number swelling to 3000-5000 protesters in the evenings. They erected protest banners proclaiming “Mr. President, With salinity and low prices for harvests it is not possible to accept the higher price for irrigation water,” and “Make those who approved the price increase pay for it, for being traitors to the campesinos.”<sup>78</sup> The encampment included shelters, sleeping quarters, kitchens and even a healthcare unit staffed by local nurses. Dozens of unions supported the farmers, including the beer brewers’ union and the mariachi union (good allies, of course, to have at an encampment) and student groups from universities, high schools, and even elementary schools.<sup>79</sup> Agents of the Dirección Federal de Seguridad and Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales kept close watch on the protest, and noted repeatedly that the LAE led the way in maintaining the encampment and was the best able of the Valley’s agrarian organizations to mobilize farmers to join the protest. The LAE consistently rallied 1500-2000 supporters for protests, while the LCA, UAR and smaller organizations combined could only turn up fewer than 1000 protesters.<sup>80</sup> Yet they noted that the protesters had the

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<sup>77</sup> Ejidatorios and Colonos to Del Mazo, 18 February 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>78</sup> DFS Memorandum, 17 February 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-63, Bundle 8, Folio 282.

<sup>79</sup> The LAE sent letters of thanks to 42 unions, student groups, and the Mexicali Chamber of Commerce for their support in the encampment, offering a glimpse of the broad-based support the strikers enjoyed in their protest. Various letters from LAE, 15 March 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>80</sup> DFS Report, 5 March 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-963, Bundle 9, Folio 19.

support of virtually every local political, labor, and civil society group, from industrial workers' unions to student groups to members of the local PRI.<sup>81</sup>

Tension pervaded the encampment. Federal troops and police officers guarded the occupied plaza, arresting and detaining protesters who got out of order.<sup>82</sup> The three main agrarian groups in the protest formed an at times uneasy alliance; both the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias and the Unión Agrícola Regional refused to join Garzón in forming a tripartite committee to coordinate the protest because of their political differences. Even government representatives were at odds. While Governor Eligio Esquivel gave speeches saying that the increase in water prices had to be faced if the Distrito de Riego were to keep operating, state senator Gustavo Vildósola urged the protesters to stand firm until the proposed increase had been dropped.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, the DFS warned of a pervasive mood of “worry, nervousness, and distrust” among the protesters, and that members of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional had been visiting the encampment at night, giving out candy and cigarettes.<sup>84</sup> Later, a 3500-person demonstration led by the PRI-affiliated CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, Federation of Mexican Workers) and joined by teachers, students, and small business owners marched to the Distrito's office and warned that if González Lugo did not resign by the end of the day, they would “remove him by force.” Police officers and soldiers armed with tear gas and machine guns kept them under control.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> DGIPS Report, 7 March 1963. AGN, Galería 2, Box 1476B, Folios 30-31.

<sup>82</sup> DFS Report, 18 February 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-63, Bundle 8, Folio 288.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> DFS Report, 22 February 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-963, Bundle 8, Folio 302.

<sup>85</sup> DFS Report, 26 February 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-963, Bundle 8, Folio 346.

In addition to the price freeze, the protesters demanded that farmers be allowed to elect a representative to the Executive Committee of the Distrito de Riego, which they claimed a 1953 presidential decree had called for, but which had never happened.<sup>86</sup> When the request was not granted, the farmers carried out their own election, overseen by a notary public, from February 23 until March 6. The LAE reported that in this “secret” vote (in which farmers nonetheless submitted their name, ejido, parcel number, and signature, Francisco Díaz Echerivel had been unanimously elected by 4,517 ejidatorios and 297 colonos, with 17 nulled votes (the overwhelming majority of voters, of course, would have been LAE members)).<sup>87</sup>

With Mexicali paralyzed by the crisis, President López Mateos sent sub-secretary of Gobernación (and future president of Mexico) Luis Echeverría to Mexicali as a special Presidential representative to mediate. Negotiations dragged on until 2:30 AM in the morning of March 9<sup>th</sup>, but the farmers finally got what they wanted. The price of water remained the same, for the time being, and González Lugo was replaced as director of the Distrito de Riego.

The resolution was a major victory for the Liga Agraria Estatal and the Central Campesina Independiente. Despite a standing rule that only the members of CNC-affiliated groups could be represented in the Distrito de Riego, Francisco Díaz Echerivel was granted a position on the *Comité Directivo* (Executive Committee) of the Distrito. Even more significantly, Alfonso Garzón won a place on the newly created *Comisión Mixta Agraria* (Mixed Agrarian Committee). Formed as part of the resolution of the conflict, the Comisión was formed of representatives from the agrarian unions, hydraulic engineers and technicians

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<sup>86</sup> LAE to Luis Ziéroid Reyes, 23 February 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>87</sup> LAE to Ziéroid Reyes, 7 March 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

from the Distrito, and accountants from the SRH and agrarian banks. It was tasked with studying and implementing the reorganization of the Distrito started by the Advisory Committee: determining water allocations, forming budgets and setting water prices, determining and undertaking infrastructure repairs, and the like. The establishment of the Comisión Mixta owed to the demands of farmers for a more open, accountable, participatory process of re-organizing and ordering water distribution in Mexicali.<sup>88</sup> The LAE and CCI had scored a major coup: official representation, in spite of their independence from the PRI, in perhaps the most influential government institution in Baja California.<sup>89</sup>

With planting soon to begin for the summer cotton season, the encampment disbanded and the Valley returned to normal. Operations at the Distrito resumed with a much more open, accountable culture. For example, the Comité Directivo began publishing a monthly bulletin of relating the Distrito's meetings and decisions, educational materials on irrigation and agricultural techniques, and water-related trivia such as, in one case, a copy of a speech given by the Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos, Alfredo del Mazo, to the Lions' Club of Mexico City, in which he called water the "greatness of Mexico."<sup>90</sup> The farmers' protest had won them an important gain in influence in the administration of water issues in Mexicali and in the future transformation of the region's infrastructure and ecology. It was an equally important milestone for the Liga Agraria Estatal and the Central Campesina Independiente. Despite their opposition to the PRI, the groups had leveraged the unrest over salinity and water distribution to win them an important institutional role in the Distrito de

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<sup>88</sup> Open letter from Liga Agraria Estatal; "Como debe trabajar la comision mixta (ingenieros y contadores) propuesta por la secretaria de recursos hidraulicos a las organizaciones campesinas," 7 March 1963. AGN, Galería 2, Box 1476B, File 18, Folios 9-12.

<sup>89</sup> Minutes of Meeting, 9 March 1963. AHEBC, Fondo Gobierno del Estado, Irrigación, Box 366, File 8.

<sup>90</sup> Boletín: Organo Oficial del Comité Directivo Agrícola del Distrito de Riego No. 14 Mexicali, B.C. No. 1 Vol. 1, 1 April 1963. Archivo Histórico del Aguas, Biblioteca.



Riego, and further established their reputation as the most dynamic and effective of the region's agrarian organizations.

The CCI's success in the Mexicali water protest contrasted with its efforts elsewhere. Outside of Baja California, the CCI had only ambivalent victories along with many failures. Most of its day-to-day work consisted of helping rural-dwellers write and deliver petitions for the distribution of ejidal lands, irrigation water, agrarian credit, and other agricultural supports to the *Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización* (Department of Agrarian Matters and Colonization) within the *Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería*, and of shepherding those petitions through the bureaucracy. By April, the group claimed to have filed a total of 1,035 *oficios* (petitions) on behalf of its members with the DAAC.<sup>91</sup> The majority, unfortunately, were ignored – purposefully lost or otherwise stalled – causing the group to complain repeatedly to the President, to no avail.

Periodically, the CCI staged demonstrations to demand land distribution, and even led land invasions. Only a few weeks after its founding, for example, Braulio Maldonado led a group of CCI members at an ejido southeast of Mexico City, where ejidatarios had complained that a local landowner had been attempting to usurp ejido lands. The outcome was pretty typical of the CCI's direct actions. According to the vaguely-worded DFS report on the events (which emphasized the group's connections to the Partido Comunista Mexicano), the local police met the group, a fight broke out, one protester was arrested and another escaped.<sup>92</sup>

The CCI leadership devoted considerable time to fundraising and proselytizing across Mexico, attempting to win members ejido by ejido. Its three founders, Garzón, Danzós, and

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<sup>91</sup> DFS Report, 23 April 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 259.

<sup>92</sup> DFS Report, 2 February 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 28.

Orona, traveled almost constantly to visit CCI affiliates or potential members across the country. They held meetings where agrarian reform, Cuba, the United States, the PRI, and the Colorado River salinity problem were discussed *ad nauseam*.

At one such meeting in April, the CCI decided to launch a campaign for the presidential elections that fall. They agreed to form a new political party, to be called the *Frente Electoral del Pueblo* (Electoral Front of the People, FEP), that would unite leftists of the CCI, the MLN, the Partido Comunista Mexicano, and the Partido Popular Socialista (officially, the CCI opposed the PPS, but in reality the two groups shared members). They floated Braulio Maldonado and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as potential candidates.<sup>93</sup> At another, much larger rally later in the month, group leaders asked members to attempt to convince their fellow ejidatarios to join the CCI so that the group would have more members by June, when they planned an enormous demonstration in front of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City to demand that the FEP be registered as an official political party. They also promised that if their oficios demanding land distribution had not been answered by June, the group would invade the lands in question.<sup>94</sup>

While the CCI concerned the Mexican government as Keller described, it would be a stretch to argue that the group threatened the PRI or that the government truly feared it. While larger and more influential than many other groups, the CCI remained fairly small. Moreover, its day-to-day activities were easily repressed by the PRI's usual methods. By such tactics as stalling the group's bureaucratic requests, censoring positive coverage of it in the press, disrupting its rallies and meetings with the police, intimidating or jailing members, and the constant oppressive surveillance of the DFS, the government significantly hindered

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<sup>93</sup> DFS Report, 16 April 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 249.

<sup>94</sup> DFS Report, 23 April 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 259.

the CCI. While the group claimed a national membership in the millions, attendance at its meetings and congresses dwindled to the hundreds. Fundraising became a serious problem. By May, the DFS reported that the CCI lacked the resources to fund many of its activities, preventing it from expanding to other states as well as holding meetings in areas where it already had a presence. The only CCI leader who reliably could raise funds was Alfonso Garzón; the DFS reported that the group issued him \$17,000 pesos worth of bonds to sell in Baja California.<sup>95</sup>

Repression was constant. A group meeting at an ejido in Tamaulipas ended with dozens of members – 35, according to the DFS; 60, according to the CCI – rounded up and questioned for hours by the military.<sup>96</sup> In June the police, DFS, and *granaderos* (riot police) raided a CCI meeting in Mexico City, arresting leader Humberto Serrano and other members, and then raided the group's headquarters and stole its files.<sup>97</sup> CCI members reported being stalked by DFS agents and CNC thugs in cars without license plates. Leaders pleaded with members to conduct themselves with strict orderliness when presenting *oficios* or conducting business at the offices of the DAAC, because the police used the slightest provocation to arrest group members or violently disperse them.<sup>98</sup> In June, the CCI reported the murders of three members in Guerrero and two in Hidalgo; in August it reported another five killed in Guerrero.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> DFS Report, 17 May 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 314.

<sup>96</sup> DFS Report, 16 April 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 3, Folio 132.

<sup>97</sup> DFS Report, 11 June 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 356; Undated Memorandum, AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 3, Folio 8.

<sup>98</sup> DFS Report, 5 August 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 3, Folio 236.

<sup>99</sup> I have not sought nor found documentary evidence regarding these murders beyond the DFS records. DFS report, 29 May 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 237; DFS report, 16 April 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 2, Folio 356; DFS report, 13 August, 1963. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 3, Folio 236.

The effectiveness of repression casts doubts on Keller's assertion that the Mexican government greatly feared the CCI. Without speculating on the psychological state of Mexican leaders, it is doubtful that they would have entertained the CCI as an existential threat to the PRI structure for very long. On the one hand, the CCI's radical, oppositional stance along with its close ties to communists limited its appeal among most Mexicans. On the other hand, from early on repression severely limited the CCI's ability to gain new members, raise funds, and carry out its daily activities. While individual DFS agents (or U.S. Consular officials such as Kennedy Crockett) may have written exaggerated, paranoid reports on the threat posed by the CCI, it is unlikely that government officials shared their views at face value. The CCI simply did not pose an existential threat to the PRI; at most, it was an irritant.

Mexicali, the salinity problem, and Alfonso Garzón proved the one exception. The size, length, and success of the water price protest proved just how much support and effectiveness Garzón and the CCI could muster in Baja California. Moreover, it showed how the salinity problem and the instability it engendered helped give the CCI influence among Mexicans who would normally be disposed to support the government. The water price protest had unified the Liga Agraria Estatal and its rival Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, and won support from all sectors of Mexicalense society, and there were other indications that the salinity problem was turning social groups normally loyal to the PRI into Communist fellow travellers.

A series of articles in the San Diego *Union*, for example, described the irony that Baja California – an area more prosperous than most of the country – should be one of its centers for “Communist agitation.” It quoted a citizen who said “[w]e are isolated. Geographically

and spiritually, we are far removed from our central government. We also have reason to be jealous and suspicious of that government.”<sup>100</sup> The article warned that “Communist agitation, now entering its fifth year in the Mexicali Valley, is making itself felt increasingly.

Unwittingly, scores of sincere anti-Communists are supporting Red agitators on such popular and explosive issues as the price and usage of irrigation water”. The article drew parallels between events in Mexicali and the broader post-Cuba Cold War, stating “the valley’s major problem may be international in character,” and quoting a Mexicali newspaper editor who said “[o]ur problem is shared by all Latin America today. Basically, it is a problem in the fight against communism. We badly need leadership, hemisphere leadership.’ There was no doubt as to the place in which his remarks were aimed: Washington.”<sup>101</sup>

The salinity problem and the anger it aroused created common ground between Mexicalense social groups that had previously mistrusted one another. The more radical, such as the LAE, began to refer to the salinity as a policy of genocide, and likened it to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The only difference, as LAE member Emilio López Zamora wrote, was that salt killed slowly. But its effects would be identical.<sup>102</sup> Bill Blackledge, an executive at the Industrial Jabonera and at the completely opposite end of the political spectrum from the LAE, warned that any lands irrigated with river water would yield declining harvests because of salinization. The Asociación Algodonera had long been concerned about the salt, he wrote, but had remained silent in the interest of preserving good relations with the United States. But that could change if no solution were soon offered. Meanwhile, “the communists, knowing that they benefit from any small problem to achieve

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<sup>100</sup> “Mexicali Valley’s Isolation Plays Into Agitators’ Hands,” *San Diego Union*, 16 June 1963.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> “Un Genocidio,” *El Mexicano*, 29 June 1963.

their goals of agitation, have once again taken this legitimate quarrel and will use it to make demonstrations against the United States... by October, when the period given by the Presidents of both countries to solve the problem has expired, and there is no other offer than the ridiculous one from the Bureau of Reclamation, [which is] just to not recognize their earlier errors, the protests will cause bigger problems than the ones we are now experiencing. It almost seems that the actions of some in the Department of State and the Department of the Interior are meant to intensify communist propaganda.”<sup>103</sup>

Moreover, the salinity problem had limited the effectiveness of repression against Garzón. Neither death threats nor a spell in jail had halted his momentum. Thus the true threat that the CCI posed to the Mexican government was that, because of the salinity problem, the group could gain enough mainstream support to destabilize the economically important state of Baja California and loosen the PRI's hold on a region that had long eluded its political control. Compounding the uncertainty, the solution to the salinity problem lay in U.S. hands, beyond the influence of the PRI and threatened by the obstinacy of Arizonans and the Bureau of Reclamation.

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As the water price protest roiled Mexicali, word had reached the Department of State of what the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation would propose as a solution when it released its final report in early April. Prevented by Hayden's modification of the appropriations bill from studying a by-pass canal or a modification of the works at Wellton-Mohawk, the plan instead would adopt a seemingly paradoxical treatment: *increasing* the underground pumping from Wellton-Mohawk. The first phase of the Bureau's plan would see 25 new deep wells

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<sup>103</sup> Blackledge to SRE, 27 August 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, C-133-3, folios 75-80.

constructed in the Wellton-Mohawk Valley, bringing the total number to 92. The Bureau would also install tile drainage on 8,000 acres. There was some logic behind this seemingly contradictory solution. More wells would enable a more rapid rate of pumping during the summertime, when the river's high flow would dilute the added salinity to safe levels. This would mean less pumping during the wintertime. Moreover, more wells would enable the pumping at Wellton-Mohawk to be more selective. The underground aquifer was not uniformly saline, and the water table lay closer to the surface in some areas than in others. More wells would mean the Bureau could more precisely match the pumping at Wellton-Mohawk to the volume and salinity of the river's main flow – pumping higher salinity water at a higher volume when the river was high, and reducing the volume and salinity when the river was low. Nonetheless, the Bureau admitted that the plan would only reduce the salinity of Mexico's water to 2000 ppm, far above what Mexico considered acceptable.<sup>104</sup>

The Bureau of Reclamation issued its report, entitled “Special Studies – Delivery of Water to Mexico,” in early April. As predicted, Mexico rejected the proposal in no uncertain terms. David Herrera Jordán told Joseph Friedkin that it was “incomplete and unsatisfactory.”<sup>105</sup> The problem, he told the Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, was not just that the reduction in salinity was woefully insufficient, but that the Bureau plan completely ignored the underlying legal issue: what qualified as “return waters” and a “source” of the Colorado according to the Treaty? As Herrera put it, “as long as the juridical bases of the studies are not attacked, the United States will propose solutions that are incomplete and will never satisfy Mexican interests. The fundamental difference is that the United States

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<sup>104</sup> Frey to Dungan, 27 February 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

<sup>105</sup> Department of State Memorandum, 15 April 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

considers that the waters pumped from the Wellton-Mohawk aquifer are a source of the Colorado River and Mexico does not.”<sup>106</sup>

Shortly after the release of the report, Ambassador Antonio Carrillo met with Department of State officials (the documents do not tell us which officials). He protested the Bureau’s recommendations, and they responded sympathetically; Carrillo told Manuel Tello that he had been given the impression that the Department of State would not be opposed if Mexico took up its case vigorously and directly with the President. They even recommended that Mexico present another official diplomatic protest, as brief and concise as possible, which they would deliver directly to Kennedy.<sup>107</sup> The officials implied that Wellton-Mohawk been built imprudently and its effects on Mexico truly were unreasonable, leading Carrillo to believe that taking a hardline stance might work in Mexico’s favor.<sup>108</sup> As he wrote to Tello, “We must not tolerate, nor can we accept, that the fact that the United States is a federal regime and that within the federal authority power is divided between the executive and legislative branches, hurt our interests or limit the obligations of the United States. From the international point of view our relations are with the U.S. government, not with the Department of the Interior or the Senate Appropriations Committee or the irrigation authorities of the state of Arizona.”<sup>109</sup> A few days later, Carrillo met with Ralph Dungan, who likewise urged Mexico to make its case as directly as possible to Kennedy. The Department of the Interior and Carl Hayden – whom Dungan called Mexico’s primary enemy

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<sup>106</sup> Herrera Jordán to Lorenzo Hernández, 4 April 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 96-97.

<sup>107</sup> Carrillo to Tello, 18 April 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 106-108.

<sup>108</sup> Annex to Letter, Carrillo to Tello, 18 April 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 109-111.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



– would never agree on a solution; it would have to come from Kennedy himself, whom Dungan promised “will not back down.”<sup>110</sup>

In mid-May, Carrillo delivered the Mexican government’s official reply to the Bureau’s report. The letter stated that “the conclusions and recommendations contained therein are unacceptable to my country” because they did not solve the problem of the highly saline waters being drained by Wellton-Mohawk, and because they “represent an unjustified attempt to cause Mexico to accept those discharges as part of the volume of water from the Colorado River to which it is entitled under the Treaty of February 3, 1944... Basically, my Government considers that ‘a permanent and effective solution’ of this problem cannot be attained if it does not start with the recognition of the fact that Mexico has rights that must be respected and that this is not simply a matter of alleviating, as the Report proposes, the harmful consequences deriving from a disregard of those rights.”<sup>111</sup> The whole issue, the letter stated, was the United States refused to consider Mexico’s arguments that pumping saline water from deep underground in Wellton-Mohawk did not constitute “return waters” as understood by the Treaty. “For it must be emphasized once again that those [dissolved mineral] solids do not come from waters that ‘find their way back’ to the Colorado after being used for irrigation, but are brought by other waters that are artificially extracted from an underground deposit having a high salt content.”<sup>112</sup>

The letter warned that Mexico had retained the counsel of Mexican lawyers to build a case should Mexico take the issue to an international tribunal. “As stated before, the study of the Bureau of Reclamation is based on a principle of inequality which is contrary to the spirit

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<sup>110</sup> Carrillo to Tello, 24 April 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 126-130.

<sup>111</sup> Carrillo to Rusk, 17 May 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

of the Water Treaty of 1944 and, in general, to the principles of law that should be the guiding rule for the conduct of the various co-riparian States along an international river.” Mexican officials were tiring of U.S. expressions of concern and promises for resolution that were not matched with action: “It is plain that all those expressions of good faith and cooperation could not be harmonized with the discriminatory treatment that results from any attempt to have Mexico accept, as part of its allotment of waters from the Colorado River, the harmful waters extracted from the Wellton-Mohawk ground-water basin, when beyond a doubt no district in the Colorado River basin would consent, under the same conditions, to have its irrigation water mixed with water of such quality and origin as that from Wellton-Mohawk.”<sup>113</sup>

Kennedy responded to the complaint a few days later. While his tone was conciliatory, he promised nothing more than what the Bureau of Reclamation had proposed. \$6 million dollars would be spent on tile drainage and new wells before the winter. But the letter ignored the specific issues raised by Carrillo, and it did not specify what quality of water Mexico could expect to receive.<sup>114</sup>

The Mexican government found itself in a bind. In spite of Kennedy’s commitment, the White House had been unable to overcome the obstinacy of Carl Hayden and the Bureau of Reclamation for a more favorable solution to the problem. At the same time, Mexicalenses’ frustration continued to grow, and lent fuel to the nascent CCI. Reports indicated, moreover, that the increase in salinity had begun to have serious effects on the soil and groundwater of the Mexicali Valley. While the government’s repressive apparatus could easily deal with the CCI, repression could not quell the widespread unrest that would occur if

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Kennedy to López Mateos, 16 May 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

the salinity problem continued indefinitely. Already, the water price protest had demonstrated that water-related issues helped the CCI form alliances with factions of Mexicali society that would normally have shunned its radical stance. In fact, such repression would be counter-productive, alienating social groups usually loyal to the PRI, such as the CNC, the cotton industry, and middle-class businesspeople. The salinity issue's potential for causing political unrest, and the limited effectiveness of repression, increasingly concerned the Mexican government over the summer of 1963.

Moreover, scientists had begun to document the effects of salinity on Mexicali's soils and cotton production, and the findings were worrisome. In May the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos issued an alarming report on the condition of Mexicali's aquifer. Groundwater exploitation had leapt since the salinity problem had reduced the availability of river water. The report warned that the Valley's aquifer was beginning to salinize and would be exhausted within ten years if present conditions continued.<sup>115</sup> Aquifer exploitation would increase as long as the salinity of the river remained high, as more and more farmers turned to wells to irrigate their fields. At the same time, U.S. plans for new wells north of the border and to line the All-American Canal with cement (a considerable volume of water seeped into the ground from the All-American Canal, which was unlined, and helped feed Mexican wells) would see the aquifer's recharge rate plummet, allowing salt water from the Sea of Cortés to infiltrate far inland into the Delta's soils. The greatest danger to the aquifer was the salinity problem, which forced farmers to use groundwater from wells instead of surface water from the river, and caused the gradual salinization of the Valley's soils, and eventually, its groundwater. This could reduce the cultivable area from about 200,000 hectares at present

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<sup>115</sup> "Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, B.C.," May 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 140-150.

to less than 75,000 Ha. As the report put it, “To give an idea of the magnitude of the quantities of salt that these waters [from Wellton-Mohawk] bring to the soils of the Mexicali Valley and the damage they cause, to transport the 3 million tons of salt annually deposited by the river it would require a fleet of five trucks of five tons each, working continuously all year and making 1650 trips a day, or 69 trucks per hour.”<sup>116</sup>

In late August the IBWC engineer W.E. Walker visited the Valley for a fact-finding mission accompanied by Bill Blackledge. They found a general upward trend in overall production, but also increasing disparity in crop yields from plot to plot. Cotton fields irrigated by well water, they reported, had seen production rocket to almost 2.5 bales per acre, but fields irrigated with river water had dropped to less than 1 bale per acre, “a decrease of nearly 30%.”<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the decrease in production on river water-irrigated plots dated from 1961, the year the salinity problem had begun, and had reversed an upward trend. Anecdotal evidence supported this disparity: “There were in this area, as in all others visited, poor fields of cotton adjoining excellent fields.”<sup>118</sup> The men saw little visible evidence of salinization, but when they did, it offered a stark image. “At a point some three miles south of Bataques a relatively small field was found showing clear evidence of effects of salt; a very dark crust was formed on the shoulders of ridges and these were surrounded by extensive white deposits. Very sparse cotton was growing in the worst areas, but very good cotton was growing in part of the field.” They warned further that not all salt buildup and damage was visible, but could occur without notice within the soils. The Mexican technicians who accompanied them said that areas of once-productive lands had been abandoned due to

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Report to the Commissioner (IBWC), 29 August 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

poor drainage even before the salinity problem had begun, and that the problem would only accelerate such abandonment.<sup>119</sup>

As summer went by, with no solution at hand beside the Bureau of Reclamation's inadequate plan, the Department of State became increasingly anxious about the effects of the salinity problem on Mexicali's politics and how the Mexican government might react. A telling aspect of State Department officials' attitude is that, while concerned by the rise of pro-Cuba sentiment in Mexico as embodied by the MLN and the CCI, most U.S. officials did not believe that Mexican leftists posed a serious threat to the Mexican government. In July, for example, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico summarized that "Lopez Mateos throughout his administration has balanced off the pressures of the so-called right ('Alemanismo') and the extreme left ('Cardenismo') sectors in the PRI. His deft manipulation of politics has apparently succeeded so far, and there are many observers who believe that Lopez Mateos now has sufficient power to select his successor almost at will."<sup>120</sup> There was little doubt among U.S. officials that the PRI had a firm grip on political events in Mexico.

Their greater worry, therefore, was that the PRI would respond to unrest in Mexicali by appointing a more pro-Cuba, anti-U.S. candidate for president. U.S. officials understood the zig and zag of PRI politics. Where the party could not repress dissent, it maneuvered to outflank or co-opt it. In late May, Subsecretary of State for Latin America Robert Sayre assured Antonio Carrillo that the Department of State "is conscious of the gravity and urgency of the [salinity] problem and how it is necessary that the harmful situation [of the previous year] not be repeated, since, as López Mateos explained to President Kennedy... it

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Robert W. Adams, "Progress Report on the Presidential Race," 30 July 1963. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

will coincide with a period of political activities in a particularly sensitive area.”<sup>121</sup> Knowing how the PRI had moved closer to Cuba in order to diffuse the challenge of pro-Cuba leftists, the State Department feared that a surge of anger about salinity in October could affect the Presidential elections and the PRI’s choice of a successor to López Mateos.

As the October deadline approached, State Department officials became increasingly anxious. In late July, Manuel Tello gave a press conference on the salinity problem, telling reporters “For the moment we are relying on, and we have many reasons for placing our faith in, President Kennedy’s statement that the situation of October before last will not be repeated.”<sup>122</sup> His statement startled Ambassador Thomas Mann, who cabled the Department of State requesting “any information available in Washington as to basis [of] Tello’s ‘faith’, and whether it [is] justified by any recent developments.”<sup>123</sup> Mann understood that Tello’s public expression of faith in the United States was a tacit authorization for Mexicans to express their anger if the United States failed in its commitment.

Mann’s concerns grew. In August, he sent a long telegram to the Department of State. “Urgent and important decisions are necessary concerning the salt water problem which continues to be the number one issue in our relations with Mexico. I consider this problem of such high priority, and the risks and consequences of further delay in reaching decisions so great, that I believe this telegram merits the personal attention of the President and the Secretary [of State].”<sup>124</sup> Mann pointed out that the Garzón-led mobilization in the Mexicali Valley, troublesome already, had been kept muted because the López Mateos administration

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<sup>121</sup> Carrillo to SRE, 23 May 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-2, Folios 240-241.

<sup>122</sup> Mann to Department of State, 29 July, 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 11/1/62 – 6/16/63.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Mann to Department of State, August 22, 1963. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

was willing to keep it that way. He warned that Mexico was willing to take the salinity issue to the World Court, and Mann was convinced the United States would lose its case, and possibly see its rights to Colorado River water reduced.

“If Mexico is forced to take action against us the wraps presently held around Mexican press coverage will be taken off, the people will learn of the facts in this issue, and unnecessary damage will be done to our relations with the government and people of Mexico. Communists and opportunists will take every advantage of this opportunity to attack us on legal and moral grounds, raising issues on which they will be joined by many other Mexicans, even those who are anti-communist and normally friendly to us. Indeed, since the salinity issue could come to a head precisely at the time the Lopez Mateos administration selects the next Presidential candidate, it is even possible that a wave of anti-United States feeling, stemming from our inaction and apparent indifference, could cause the selection of a leftist candidate deemed capable of standing up to the United States in defense of Mexico’s rights. I need hardly say that the implications of such a selection could be far reaching.”<sup>125</sup>

Mann emphasized that the Wellton-Mohawk project had been deliberately constructed on the notion that because the Treaty does not mention water quality, the United States could send as much salinity as it wanted to Mexico, and that Wellton-Mohawk was now pumping out four times as much salt as was considered necessary for normal irrigation, simply to create an underground reservoir of fresh water for the benefit of local farmers. The time had come, he said, for the United States to offer a decisive solution: either a by-pass canal or tile drains covering Wellton-Mohawk. “We will not have this same choice nor the initiative once we are waist deep in a crisis situation.”<sup>126</sup>

The Mexican government increased the pressure as October approached. In September, Antonio Carrillo retained the services of Chapman and Friedman, a New York City law firm, in case the government chose to take its case to an international court. Oscar Chapman, Mexico’s lawyer, immediately recommended that the government begin collecting

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

proofs and evidence of the damages caused by the saline water in Mexicali.<sup>127</sup> At the end of the month, President López Mateos visited the Mexicali Valley in what Ambassador Mann considered a significant gesture of support. He was joined by Secretario de Agricultura y Ganadería Julián Rodríguez Adame, who, in a public speech, said that Mexico expected the United States to soon offer a solution to the problem, “If [the] U.S. is in reality a friendly and good neighbor.”<sup>128</sup> Both men reiterated Kennedy’s promise that the problem would be solved by October.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote to the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, pleading for cooperation. “I am concerned that we will have a serious crisis in our relations with Mexico if the Bureau of Reclamation carries out its plan”—that is, the 25 new wells that would reduce salinity to around 2,000 ppm.<sup>129</sup> Echoing Mann, he wrote “I believe we still have an opportunity to adopt measures which will avoid a crisis in our relations with Mexico and protect the interest of the Colorado Basin States. I doubt that we will have comparable freedom in the midst of a crisis.” Rusk proposed that the pumping at Wellton-Mohawk be reduced by 61,000 acre-feet over the coming winter, which would keep the salinity of Mexico’s water to less than 1,200 ppm. The Bureau of Reclamation already planned a three-week suspension of operations at Wellton-Mohawk in order to install the pumps on the 25 new wells, meaning return flow would already be reduced, making it easier to meet the targeted reduction.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Carrillo to Tello, 3 September 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-3, Folios 93-94.

<sup>128</sup> Mann to Department of State, 27 September 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>129</sup> Rusk to Udall, Undated. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>130</sup> Frey to Dungan, 30 September 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.



Udall agreed, but Carl Hayden and the Bureau of Reclamation refused to budge. Hayden flatly refused to endorse the proposal to reduce pumping, and repeated his claim that Mexico's real problem was its inadequate drainage infrastructure. As Frederick Dutton, a special assistant to Kennedy for interdepartmental relations, put it, "The Senator waved aside our concern over the outcome of an International Court suit".<sup>131</sup> In the first days of October, meanwhile, Udall got word that the Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Floyd Dominy had testified before the House Public Works Appropriations Subcommittee "on what appears clearly to be Phase 3... [of] 'Special Studies, Delivery of Waters to Mexico'".<sup>132</sup> Only Phase 1 of the Bureau's plan had been authorized – the 25 new wells about to go on line – and Mexico had already rejected it. But Dominy was now seeking appropriations to begin the still unapproved third phase (which called for, in addition to other works, the construction of wells along the border with Mexico to intercept underground water flows, delivering to Mexico water as part of its annual treaty amount that otherwise would have flowed to it through the underground aquifer). As White House staffer Edwin Martin put it, "The public record of Mr. Dominy's testimony is, of course, available to the Mexican Government and was reported upon in the press when it was released last month."<sup>133</sup>

On the first day of October, CILA commissioner David Herrera Jordán called a meeting with his IBWC counterpart Joseph Friedkin. Herrera "called attention to today's date, October 1, as a significant deadline" in the salinity crisis: the date by which Kennedy

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<sup>131</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 1 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>132</sup> Edwin M. Martin to Udall, 4 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. Marc Reisner offers a colorful portrait of Floyd Dominy in *Cadillac Desert*.

had promised the problem would be solved.<sup>134</sup> He added that he had been called to Mexico City to meet with Manual Tello, and would leave the next day. Friedkin reported that “To newspapermen at the Juárez airport he plans to give some other explanation for his travel, in order to avoid any public discussion of the salinity problem which in present circumstances would be objectionable.” Pumping from Wellton-Mohawk had stopped that day – it would be suspended for three weeks while the new pumps were installed. Herrera pointed out that Mexico had already rejected the plan and “stressed the necessity for prompt action towards a resolution of the fundamental issue, and indicated bewilderment over the absence of any United States reaction to Mexico’s protests against the Bureau of Reclamation’s plans.”<sup>135</sup> His own personal opinion was that the problem could only be resolved by treating the underlying legal question of treaty interpretation, either within the CILA-IBWC “or by other means”.<sup>136</sup> With Hayden and Dominy still obstructing the proposal to reduce pumping from Wellton-Mohawk to keep salinity below 1,200 ppm, Friedkin had nothing substantive to offer his counterpart. The meeting was a disaster. Days later, word arrived from the U.S. Consulate in Mexicali that “members of the Mexicali Valley’s regional agricultural union and the local chamber of Manufacturing Industries had taken steps to re-activate the Committee for Defense of [the] Mexicali Valley,” and were preparing for more protests against the United States.<sup>137</sup>

In a last-ditch effort, Secretary Udall met with Secretary Rusk, Commissioner Friedkin, Commissioner Dominy, Robert Sayre, and a handful of legal advisors and

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<sup>134</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 1 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, 8 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

assistants, on October 11. Dominy, for once, “is reported to have been agreeable”, and consented to the plan to reduce the pumping from Wellton-Mohawk over the winter.<sup>138</sup> Robert Sayre said the Mexican government would only accept the proposal if a long-term, permanent solution was also forthcoming. They hashed out the following arrangement: the Bureau would reduce pumping from Wellton-Mohawk temporarily, while it installed and tested the efficacy of tile drainage in the Wellton-Mohawk district. They would know by February if tile drains would reduce salinity to an acceptable level. If the tile drains did not work, the Department of the Interior committed to pursuing a by-pass channel as a long-term solution.<sup>139</sup> Floyd Dominy was finally onside, likely because the Wellton-Mohawk district would now get tile drains that the Bureau had wanted all along. But the agreement was still tenuous: the men agreed to have Ambassador Mann request that Mexico keep details of the alternatives secret until the tile drains had been tested, for one thing. For another, Carl Hayden would have to be persuaded.

Udall and Dominy met with Hayden a few days later “and returned hopeful about the Senator’s reaction.”<sup>140</sup> He seemed amenable to a long-term solution based on tile drainage, although it was noted that “the experts disagree” on whether the tile drains would in fact reduce salinity to an acceptable level (the Bureau claimed they would, but was unwilling to share its data with the IBWC, which claimed they would not). An advisor to Hayden present at the meeting could not help asking “What’s in it for the farmers of Welton-Mohawk [sic]?”,

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<sup>138</sup> Frey to Dungan, 11 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>139</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 11 October 1963. NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>140</sup> Memorandum from Frey to Dungan, 18 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

but when the men called the Wellton-Mohawk District's lawyer to float the idea, he seemed agreeable as well. Nonetheless, "While encouraged, no one is counting their chickens yet."<sup>141</sup>

Mexico did agree to the plan, at least as a temporary measure. The plan, as Carrillo pointed out, enacted practical measures to reduce salinity in the near future and implicitly recognized Mexico's position that the 1944 treaty did not force Mexico to accept any and all water from the United States, no matter its quality or origin. Abruptly, the Mexican government switched its public tone, from warnings of agitation and unrest in Mexicali to press statements praising "the atmosphere of understanding in which diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States are unfolding."<sup>142</sup> A path forward had been found, at least temporarily, and Stewart Udall wrote to Ralph Dungan in relief: "I think we're around the corner!"<sup>143</sup>

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The political tensions caused by the salinity problem only escalated after the 1962 presidential summit. Salinity drove Alfonso Garzón down an increasingly radical, influential path of local mobilizing in Baja California, and towards greater national influence with the founding of the CCI. His influence and the new organization worried the Mexican government, but not because they posed an existential threat to the ruling party. The PRI's usual methods of repression could easily paralyze the CCI, but the intractable salinity problem threatened to extend Garzón's influence among the social groups the PRI could normally count on in Baja California, from the CNC, to industrial workers, to small-business

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> "Winter Without Salt in Mexicali," *Excelsior*, 26 October 1963; Quoted in Tobin to Frey, 6 November 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

<sup>143</sup> Cover Note affixed to "Report to the President," 15 October 1963. JFK, White House Staff Files – Ralph Dungan, Box 002; Folder: Mexico – Colorado River Salinity Problem 7/26/63 – 11/21/63 & Undated.

owners to the Asociación Algodonera. If the salinity issue were not resolved, it might weaken the PRI's already tenuous hold on the state of Baja California.

The inability of the Department of the Interior to overcome the obstinacy of Arizonans and the Bureau of Reclamation had caused the Mexican government frustration. Yet the last-minute deal to abate the salinity problem over the coming winter had revealed a useful tactic to compel U.S. action on salinity. By threatening to unleash the CCI and popular anger over the salinity problem, the Mexican government had struck the State Department's pressure point, its desire to win allies against Castro and to limit the appeal of Communism in Latin America. Moreover, the PRI found a way to turn the challenge to its rule represented by the CCI into the means to reinforce it.

**Chapter Four**  
**Domestic Protests as Foreign Policy: The Path to a Temporary Solution**

The failure to reach a long-term settlement by the October 1963 deadline sapped the Mexican government's patience for diplomatic negotiations and ushered in a new, politicized phase of the salinity issue. In May, the government of Mexico began to support and publicize demonstrations in Mexicali against the United States. The Liga Agraria Estatal and the Comité de Defensa undertook weekly protests outside of the U.S. consulate in Mexicali. With the PRI's assent, the demonstrations became massive and took on a previously unseen level of anti-U.S. fervor. Meanwhile, the CNC and CCI worked together to plan a massive demonstration against the salinity to be held in August in Mexico City.

The demonstrations in Mexicali, and the PRI's willingness to condone Alfonso Garzón's participation in them, gave the CCI a much-needed boost. In spite of heavy repression, the group continued its presidential campaign for Ramon Danzós under the Frente Electoral del Pueblo. The Mexicali demonstrations and the planning for the national day of protest in August lent credibility to the group's campaign efforts.

The PRI's un-muzzling of the Comité de Defensa and CCI achieved its desired effect within the White House and State Department. Fearing the consequences of the August national protest, U.S. officials sought to achieve a favorable settlement for Mexico. Negotiations for a solution to the problem recommenced in the IBWC-CILA, and before long President Johnson had informally promised the Mexican government that the problem would be resolved in its favor.

The imminent solution coincided with the repression of the CCI. After presenting a draft of the solution to Comité de Defensa members and gaining their assent, the PRI cancelled the August protest. Coming at the end of months of increasingly harsh repression, the cancellation rocked the CCI. In the aftermath, the group split: Alfonso Garzón ejected Danzós, Arturo Orona, and other PCM members from the CCI and disavowed the FEP election campaign. Garzón began a process of re-affirming loyalty to the PRI, but for the months after the split, both the “CCI-Garzón” and the “CCI-Roja” (Red CCI), as the DFS labeled them, drifted in turmoil.

By the end of 1964 a deal had been worked out. It was signed by the new President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz in March 1965, and would last for five years. Within the space of a few months, the CCI had been repressed, the salinity problem had been (temporarily) alleviated, and the presidential succession secured.

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Bookending the last-minute deal that gave the United States the winter to test tile drainage in Mexicali were two events with important consequences for the salinity problem. On October 1 1963, Adolfo López Mateos publicly announced that his successor would be the current Secretario de Gobernación, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. The choice sent a clear message. Despite the threat that popular unrest over salinity might compel the PRI to nominate a more leftist, anti-U.S. president, the *dedazo* showed the opposite. Díaz Ordaz was a PRI stalwart with a reputation for staunch anti-communism who had little tolerance for leftist mobilization

such as the MLN and CCI represented.<sup>1</sup> To these groups' disappointment, Lázaro Cárdenas publicly endorsed Díaz Ordaz, dispelling hopes that he might back a leftist challenger.<sup>2</sup>

On November 22, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Besides generating considerable sadness in Mexico, where Kennedy had won much public affection during his visit the previous year, his murder disheartened Mexican officials in the CILA and Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, who worried that Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson might not have the same understanding and sympathy for Mexico's position, nor the willingness to take on Carl Hayden, Arizona, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

With Johnson settled into the Oval Office, the two administrations began planning for a summit between Johnson and López Mateos in Palm Springs, California, in February. The timbre of the meeting differed from the Mexico City summit of 1962. No cheering crowds gathered to welcome López Mateos as they had President Kennedy. Instead the governor of Baja California, Eligio Esquivel, directed the state Director of Tourism to organize a motorcade of Mexicalenses to travel to Palm Springs to pay homage to López Mateos, picking up Mexicans residing in Imperial and Riverside along the way.<sup>3</sup> More striking was the forcefulness with which the Mexican delegation demanded an end to the salinity problem.

Johnson's advisors had briefed him on the volatility of the salinity issue. The tests on tile drainage in Wellton-Mohawk were supposed to have been completed by February, but

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<sup>1</sup> "Meeting of Presidents Johnson and López Mateos in California." NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>2</sup> According to J. Edgar Hoover, a trusted FBI source reported "that the candidacy of Díaz Ordaz was the result of a political agreement between the late President John F. Kennedy and Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos", at the urging, apparently, of Miguel Alemán. The source speculated that the death of Kennedy would cause the deal to fall through and that PRI president Alfonso Corona del Rosal would become the new PRI candidate. He pointed out that there had been very little publicity, and even no campaigning, for Díaz Ordaz in some states. I found no evidence elsewhere for such a deal, and, obviously, Díaz Ordaz remained the candidate. J. Edgar Hoover to Walter W. Jenkins, 30 January 1964. Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (henceforth LBJ), National Security File (henceforth NSF), Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 2: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63 – 12/65.

<sup>3</sup> Airgram from James W. Boyd to Department of State, 16 January 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 61, Folder 1: Mexico, López Mateos Visit, 2/20-22/64, Document 20.



the laying of the tile drainage had been delayed because of contractual disputes with the companies hired for the work. The delay could have political consequences. While Diaz Ordaz had a reputation for anti-Communism, a briefing paper warned Johnson that leftists had been successful in “infiltrating” the teaching profession, some government bureaucracies, workers’ unions, and peasant groups, and that the salinity problem facilitated this in Baja California: “It is this area of infiltration and indoctrination that the Mexican government has been the most negligent and where the Communist threat is greatest in Mexico.” Keeping Mexico a U.S. ally, the report continued, would require the United States to “respect Mexico’s vital interests. In the present context, this means solving the Colorado River salinity problem.”<sup>4</sup>

López Mateos’s briefing materials prepared him to take a much stronger position on salinity than he had during the meeting with Kennedy. A memorandum on the problem framed it as a fundamental moral issue: “Independently of the juridical and technical aspects of this problem, it is worth mentioning in a general, essentially human sense, the injustice of seriously harming a population center of approximately 300 000 people in Baja California and Sonora just in order to improve agricultural conditions in a small region of Arizona... The population of the Valley of Mexicali has, in the morals and consciousness of men of good faith, equal rights as the neighbor population on the other side of the border.”<sup>5</sup> In keeping with this tone, the Mexican delegation was prepared to make salinity the key topic of discussion at the meeting.

The talks brought together the top foreign policy officials of both countries. They included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Thomas Mann (promoted by Johnson from

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<sup>4</sup> “Meeting of Presidents Johnson and López Mateos in California.” NSA, MDP, Box 81.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum, 5 February 1963. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-4, Folios 182-185.

ambassador to Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, White House advisors on Latin America Ralph Dungan and Robert Sayre, IBWC Commissioner Joseph Friedkin, and Clarence Boosta, the Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico; the Mexican delegation included Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores Manuel Tello, Ambassador Antonio Carrillo Flores, and CILA Commissioner David Herrera Jordán.

The Mexican officials launched a three-pronged attack. Tello called the salinity issue “the most serious problem in relations between the two countries.”<sup>6</sup> Herrera Jordán warned that the United States’ efforts to reduce the salinity were “not enough” and that land was being abandoned at an increasing rate. Carrillo Flores paraphrased Rusk’s comments earlier in the day, to the effect that the United States and the Soviet Union had a “coincidence of policy” on halting the arms race to quip that Mexico and the United States had a “coincidence of policy” on attempting to control salinity to below 1500 ppm. He also warned that “President López Mateos would not consider passing the problem on to his successor with the assurance that the United States would keep the salinity down as a ‘favor’ to Mexico.”<sup>7</sup>

The Mexican delegation repeated the long-standing argument that the water from Wellton-Mohawk violated the 1944 treaty because it did not fit the usual definition of return water. Tello’s explanation was recorded in the White House’s memorandum of the meeting: “Mexico was not complaining about ‘return flow’, but the drainage from Wellton-Mohawk was not ‘return flow.’ Everyone knew, he said, that the Bureau of Reclamation had built a concrete-lined channel to keep the salt water from Wellton-Mohawk from contaminating U.S. lands. The United States knew perfectly well the drainage was not fit to use but would

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 21 February 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 61, Folder 1: Mexico, Lopez Mateos Visit, 2/20-22/64, Document 98a.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

destroy the land.”<sup>8</sup> They echoed as well the warning that the salinity was catalyzing Communist gains in Mexicali. As Tello said, “The United States... had seriously complicated Mexico’s political problems. The communist-led National Liberation Movement had its greatest strength in the Mexicali Valley. The United States had given the communists the salinity issue, he continued, and the communists had used it effectively to strengthen their position and condemn the Mexican Government for being ineffective. As he had already observed, he said, the Mexicali Valley was one of the few rich agricultural valleys in Mexico, and this source of wealth was being destroyed by salt.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the Mexican officials repeated the threat that continued inaction could cause a public rift in U.S.-Mexican relations. Carrillo Flores “referred to the legal opinion prepared by Chapman and Friedman. Once this opinion became public – it is favorable to the Mexican position – he thought it would be unlikely that the Mexican Government could resist public pressure to take the suit to the World Court” and said he “considered the refusal of the United States to acknowledge its obligations under the Treaty and international law as precisely the reason why the two countries had not solved the problem.”<sup>10</sup> Tello said that “The action of the United States... was inconsistent with the 1944 Water Treaty. If the two countries could not reach agreement, then he urged that we [viz., the United States] submit the problem to the International Court and in the meantime agree that we would not make the situation worse. Mexico... would accept the Court’s decision.”<sup>11</sup>

Johnson had little to offer in return. He asked for patience, explaining that he had only recently assumed office and was dealing with a new Congress, which would make

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

setting a date when the salinity problem would be solved difficult. He promised that he would have a recommendation to make to Congress in Mexico's favor once the Bureau of Reclamation's tests of tile drainage had been completed. In the meantime, he promised that the United States would take measures to mitigate the effects of the salinity, and asked Mexico not to go to the International Court for the time being.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the Mexican delegation's efforts, the meeting ended without a new agreement on the salinity issue. The Presidents' joint statement merely repeated Kennedy's commitment to resolve the problem, pending the results of the tile drainage tests in Wellton-Mohawk. While the statement pledged the "countries to work together to promote national understanding and peaceful relations", the Mexican government's patience had reached a breaking point. It now prepared, as Thomas Mann had worried months before, to take "the wraps" off Mexicalenses' resentment towards the United States.

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Mexicalenses reacted to the news from Palm Springs with disappointment and anger. The leaders of the Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali rallied to revive the protest group, which had not been officially active since the summer of 1962.<sup>13</sup> Rumors circulated that the Bureau of Reclamation was purposely delaying the tests of tile drainage until the soil beneath Wellton-Mohawk had been completely washed of minerals and Mexicali's soils had been ruined.<sup>14</sup> The truth was not much better. Salinity spiked again in March. Thomas Mann admitted to Antonio Carrillo that the effort to mitigate the spike had been hampered by Carl Hayden, who reportedly had been pressuring the Department of the Interior not to alter

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<sup>12</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 21 February 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 61, Folder 1: Mexico, Lopez Mateos Visit, 2/20-22/64, Document 34a.

<sup>13</sup> "Planean Realizar Manifestaciones de Protesta por el Caso del Colorado," *El Mexicano*, 28 February 1964.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

operations at Wellton-Mohawk.<sup>15</sup> Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall reported that the Bureau of Reclamation had disregarded the pumping schedule given to it by the IBWC and, against instructions, had begun pumping from new, highly saline wells, causing the jump in salinity.<sup>16</sup> Udall promised to “lick this problem” and assured Carrillo that the only workable solution would be a bypass canal, an opinion also shared by Thomas Mann.<sup>17</sup> In the meantime, he said, they had to let the USBR finish its test on tile drainage, but both bureaucrats urged Mexico to make direct appeals to President Johnson and to use the threat of taking the issue to the international court to keep pressure towards a solution.

Anger in Mexicali reached a new high. Bill Blackledge, of la Jabonera, wrote to Robert Allen in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City that “[t]his issue is getting hotter every day, with more hatred being shown by those who have already been hurt, and animosity reflected by those who are not directly affected... Irregardless of the intentions of the proponents of the Treaty, I don’t understand how conscientious people in Washington can allow this matter to draw the United States and Mexico further apart. You are no doubt aware how the subject is being used to defame the United States in the eyes of other Latin American countries.”<sup>18</sup> He warned that at every Comité de Defensa meeting, members made anti-American speeches and spoke about how they had 150 years’ experience with this kind of American imperialism. Alfonso Garzón was rumored to be set to return to Mexicali to lead protests there, and the whole region was preparing to rally against the salinity during Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s upcoming campaign visit to Mexicali. “If someone in the government wanted Mexico and the United States to break relations and at the same time assist the Communist

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<sup>15</sup> Carrillo to SRE, 24 March 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-4, Folios 267-268.

<sup>16</sup> Carrillo to José Gorostiza, 28 March 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-133-4, Folios 270-271.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Blackledge to Allen, 21 April 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-137-1, Folios 70-71.

conspiracy to gain a stronger foothold in Mexico, a better way could not be found than to continue handling this matter in the same manner as that to date.”<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of May, protests against the United States once again broke out in Mexicali. The evidence indicates that these latest protests were carried out with the encouragement of the local and national PRI government. The protests were larger, more strident and vocal, received far more press coverage than earlier demonstrations, and, notably, were not subject to police and army repression. At the beginning of the month, the Comité de Defensa held a meeting attended by all of its representatives. They resolved to hold weekly protests every Thursday until the salinity problem was resolved permanently. The delegation from the Liga Agraria Estatal suggested that the group hold a massive, national protest in Mexico City in July if no solution had been reached by then. The Comité agreed – it would be the largest protest it had yet carried out and its first protest activity outside of Mexicali.<sup>20</sup>

The next Thursday, the group carried out the first weekly protest, which included representatives from virtually every civic, agrarian, labor, and political group in the region, of all political stripes, from the PAN to the PRI. The demonstrators carried a coffin full of salt representing the Mexicali Valley and held a silent vigil in front of the U.S. consulate.<sup>21</sup> A week later they held another protest, where one speaker proclaimed the salt a “form of invasion of the most cruel and inhumane in human history, not even comparable to what befell Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”<sup>22</sup> Because of the protests, the U.S. consul in Mexicali,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gilberto César González Rodríguez to Procurador General de la República, 11 May 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA< File C-137-1, Folios 36-37.

<sup>21</sup> “¡Basta Ya de Sal!,” *El Mexicano*, 15 May 1964.

<sup>22</sup> “En Mexicali: Manifestación; en México: Junta de Freeman y Boyd,” *El Mexicano*, 21 May 1964.

James Boyd, was called to Mexico City to meet with embassy staff to discuss the salinity problem. As before, protesters, U.S. and Mexican government officials, and media observers connected the Mexicali protests to communism and the global Cold War. Mexico, one newspaper editorial commented, “is where Latin America begins”, and warned that anger and desperation were mounting everywhere in Mexicali. Violence and communism would both spread, it warned, if the salinity problem were not soon halted.<sup>23</sup> A newspaper published by the opposition *Partido de Acción Nacional* warned that “Yankee” domestic politics had “force[d] [Mexico] to imitate Cuba and Panama.”<sup>24</sup>



*Mexicalense protesters carry a coffin full of salt labeled “Mexicali, RIP,” May 1964. Source: IIC-UABC.*

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico telegraphed the Department of State on May 21 to warn that “recent developments indicate rapidly increasing resentment in Mexico over absence of any announcement by U.S. of steps for reducing soon the excessive salinity of

<sup>23</sup> “La Angustia y la Desesperación Invaden el Valle de Mexicali,” *Novedades*, 27 May 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Mexicali Víctima de Política Interior Yanqui,” *Avance*, 25 May 1964.

Colorado River Waters delivered to Mexico”. The Comité was protesting weekly, and had circulated a petition demanding an end to the salt. More alarmingly, the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores had warned the new U.S. Ambassador, Fulton Freeman, to cancel a trip to Mexicali planned for June “in view [of the] present low boiling point [of the] civilian population.” It quoted David Herrera Jordán’s comments to a newspaper exhorting Mexicalenses to “Maintain their virile attitude of protest for the problem from ‘sleeping the sleep of the just’” and reporting that the tile drain system test had been a failure. It also reported a “confidential survey in Mexicali area on behalf [of a] private company by [a] highly reputable public opinion investigating organization [that] shows overwhelming support for far-leftist leader Alfonso Garzon, among both rural and urban residents of area; Garzon is an advocate of direct action.”<sup>25</sup>

A second telegram sent the same day speculated on the cause of the recent surge in protests. The “Embassy has attributed [the] generally low key and sporadic nature [of] protest activities in [the] past to [the] desire [of the] GOM [to] keep lid on emotional appeals as long as this approach seemed to contribute to early, satisfactory settlement [sic]. Present step-up of public protest activities may reflect [a] decrease of GOM desire to keep lid on tight.”<sup>26</sup> The telegram warned that protests would only increase “if, as we suspect, GOM [is] now slackening its efforts to keep public opinion from becoming inflamed.” It recommended that Washington make an announcement to the effect that progress was being made, suggesting that recent discussions between the Committee of Fourteen and the Department of the

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<sup>25</sup> American Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, 21 May 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 58, Folder 8, Cables 12/63-12/65, Document 64.

<sup>26</sup> American Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, 21 May 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 58, Folder 8, Cables 12/63-12/65, Document 65.



Interior for a bypass canal be announced, “even in absence [of the] final determination as to precise solution to be effected.”<sup>27</sup>



*“First contaminate Mexican waters, and after... enter talks with Mexicans. The Jacksonian Politics of the New Wave.” An LAE/CCI Banner at a Mexicalense protest, May 1964.  
Source: IIC-UABC.*

The protests continued and spread to other cities. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, simultaneous protests in Mexicali, Tijuana, Ensenada, and Tecate drew thousands of people.<sup>28</sup> That month, the Comité de Defensa and Senator Gustavo Vildósola published 40,000 copies of a pamphlet entitled *La Sal no Debe Separar a Dos Pueblos Amigos* (The Salt Must Not Separate Two Friendly Peoples). It called for a by-pass canal in the strongest terms, accusing the United States of deliberate pollution of Mexican soil and proclaiming that “Justice and Reason are

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> DFS Memorandum, 9 June 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-4-64, Bundle 1, Folios 126-129.

on our side.”<sup>29</sup> The pamphlet’s cover used the symbolism of the border to underline the argument – voiced at the Palm Springs meeting – that the salinity problem was a moral issue transcending the wording of the 1944 treaty. It depicted a poor *campesino* family surveying the barren, salt-crusted earth, across the border from lush, green fields. It also provided geological details to back up Mexico’s argument that the water from Wellton-Mohawk was not actually return water. Diagrams of the Wellton-Mohawk valley’s subterranean features showed the function of its pumps and canals. They showed that the saline groundwater in the valley could not be considered return water as the 1944 treaty defined it, because the subterranean geology would prevent it flowing naturally back into the river without human intervention. The pamphlet, in Vildósola’s words, “is a synthesis, the elemental obligation that we all have, of defending Mexico against any aggression, direct or indirect, that signifies an attack [*atentado*] against the interests of the country.”<sup>30</sup>



<sup>29</sup> *La Sal No Debe Separar a Dos Pueblos Amigos*, 7 June 1964. IIC-UABC, Colección Martínez Retes.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

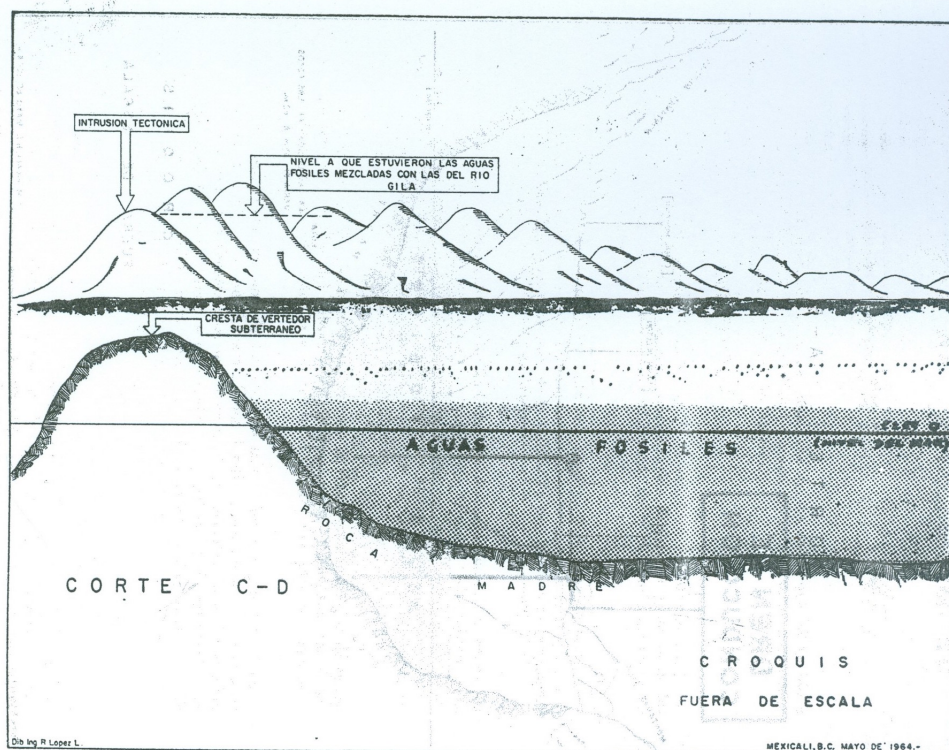
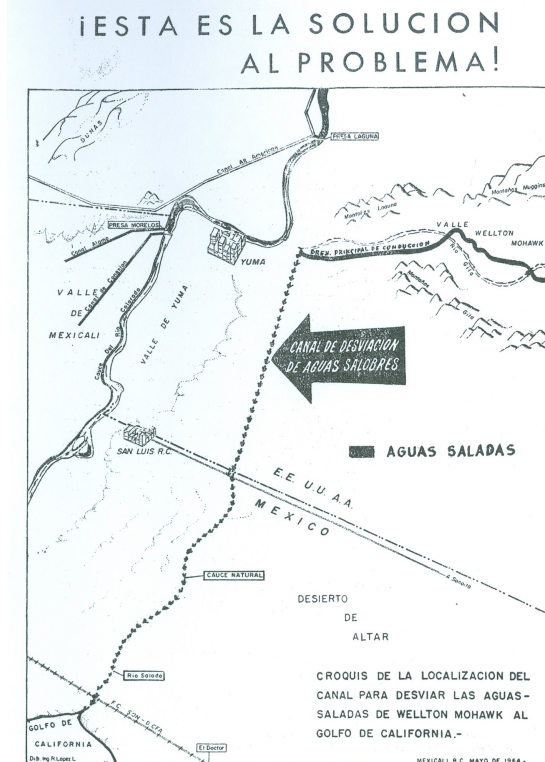


Diagram from the pamphlet showing the bedrock preventing the Valley's groundwater from flowing into the Colorado River, as evidence that it could not be considered "return" water. Source: IIC-UABC.



"This is the solution to the problem!" A diagram from the pamphlet calls for a bypass canal. Source: IIC-UABC.



In sponsoring the May protests, the PRI colluded with Alfonso Garzón and the normally oppositional Liga Agraria Estatal and Central Campesina Independiente. Indeed, the success of the protests depended upon the numbers and mobilizing power of Garzón and the two groups. Garzón returned to Mexicali in late April to help organize the weekly protests. Before leaving, he sent a communiqué to the CCI's members across the country asking them to maintain order and to support the nationwide tour of the candidate Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, because recently the police and military had been granting CCI members "complete liberty" in their activities and presidential campaign efforts for the FEP. He wanted the group to avoid making trouble that could end this reprieve from repression.<sup>31</sup>

Garzón rallied thousands of members of the LAE and CCI to take part in the weekly protests in front of the U.S. consulate. DFS agents estimated that LAE members made up a little more than half of the protesters who joined the Comité de Defensa's protests.<sup>32</sup> They carried signs with slogans such as "First they salt us, then they argue with us," "Justice Yes, Salt No," "Good Neighbor... Bah!" Other banners circulated the rumor (false, yet common in Mexicali) that President Johnson's Texas ranch, west of Austin, was irrigated with Colorado River water, and accusing him of hypocrisy.<sup>33</sup> The CCI launched a media and publicity blitz, sending pamphlets and information on the salinity problem to agrarian and workers' organizations, Chambers of Commerce, and state congresses across the country and even around the world – LAE leader Juan Rodríguez Meza claimed to have written to 48 heads of state and 54 ambassadors, asking for support for Mexicali in the salinity dispute<sup>34</sup>. In

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<sup>31</sup> DFS Memorandum, 21 April 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 5, Folio 49.

<sup>32</sup> DFS Memorandum, 21 May 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-64, Bundle

<sup>33</sup> Various photographs. IIC-UABC, Colección Martínez Retes.

<sup>34</sup> DFS Memorandum, 5 May 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-2-64, Bundle 1, Folio 76.

response, letters of solidarity and support poured into the SRE, the SRH, and the President's office, from such varied senders as the President of the Lions' Clubs of Mexico, the State Congress of Yucatán, the Chamber of Commerce of Jalapa, the MLN committee for the state of Tabasco, and even the Republic of Ghana.<sup>35</sup>

Participation in the Mexicali protests – and the permissive attitude of the police and the military – gave a much-needed boost of momentum to the CCI. Elsewhere in Mexico it fared much more poorly. Its efforts to have the FEP registered as a political party the previous year had failed. The group decided to campaign anyway, hoping to win write-in votes for its candidate Ramon Danzós, even though Mexican electoral law did not permit independent candidates. Garzón, Danzós, and Arturo Orona campaigned around Mexico, making agrarian reform, applause for Cuba, denunciations of U.S. imperialism, and the salinity problem (the former three often symbolized by the latter) the key planks of their campaign. Lázaro Cárdenas's endorsement of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's candidacy had been a heavy blow.

The steady repression of the group by the police, military and secret police had continued since the previous year and had taken a heavy toll. The national congress marking its one-year anniversary in Mexico City in January 1964 brought together only 200 members, a drastic fall from the 1000 that had attended its founding the year before.<sup>36</sup> The petitions it filed with the *Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización* for land, irrigation water, or agrarian credit went unanswered, meetings and rallies were suppressed by the police or military, and members were subject to surveillance, intimidation, and arbitrary arrest. The

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<sup>35</sup> "Encuentra eco en Africa, el Grito Mexicalense de Justicia," *El Mexicano*, 27 May 1964; Lupercio Garza Ramos to Vildósola, 25 June 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-137-1, Folios 99-103; Jalapa Chamber of Commerce to SRE, 28 May 1964, SRE, CILA, File C-137-1, Folio 124; MLN state committee of Tabasco to SRE, 30 May 1964. SRE, CILA, File C-137-1, Folio 132.

<sup>36</sup> DFS Memorandum, 8 January 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-63, Bundle 4, Folio 206.

constant repression divided the group members against each other. In March, one of its executive committee members, Manuel Granados Chirino, left the group in a rage, denouncing its other leaders, Cárdenas, the Partido Comunista Mexicano, and Garzón, accusing him of weakness and using the group only to gain favors with the PRI.<sup>37</sup> In April the DFS reported that the CCI was so low on funds that for three months it had been unable to pay the electricity bill at its Mexico City headquarters; at night its staff worked by candlelight.<sup>38</sup>

Only in Baja California did the CCI maintain a strong membership base (through its filial group the LAE), a prestigious place within local political circles, and relative freedom from police repression. With LAE members forming the majority of the protesters, Garzón enjoyed an influential place within the Comité de Defensa and rubbed shoulders with other local power brokers. After the weekly protest on May 21, for example, Garzón joined governor Eligio Esquivel, Senator Gustavo Vildósola, leaders from the CNC, the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, and the Unión Agrícola Regional, as well as representatives from the Asociación Algodonera, for a private meeting in the Palacio de Gobierno to discuss the salinity issue and protest strategy.<sup>39</sup> While elsewhere in the country CCI events brought together a few dozen or a few hundred people, in Mexicali the LAE's meetings routinely had attendance of over a thousand people.

In large part due to pressure from Garzón, moreover, the Comité de Defensa moved forward with planning a national day of protest over the salinity in July (later rescheduled for August 9<sup>th</sup>). The group envisioned a massive protest in Mexico City and smaller protests in

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<sup>37</sup> DFS Memorandum, 25 March 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 4, Folio 338.

<sup>38</sup> DFS Memorandum, 18 April 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 5, Folio 42.

<sup>39</sup> DFS Memorandum, 21 May 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-964, Bundle 12, Folios 3-9.

dozens of locales across the country. Notably, the plans had the participation of the CNC and thus the tacit backing of the PRI. The Comité solicited support from dozens of agrarian and workers' groups in Mexico City, and even won the support of the Confederación de Asociaciones Algodoneras de la República Mexicana, A.C.<sup>40</sup> These groups, which normally had relations of mistrust and antagonism – cotton growers and the cotton industry; LAE and LCA; CCI and CNC – collaborated for the national day of protest, a striking contrast to the conflict of previous years and the increasingly heavy repression of the CCI.

Garzón's involvement with the Mexicali protests affected his relationship with the CCI's co-founders and the FEP. Buoyed by his more influential role, and exhausted by police repression, he took on a more conciliatory, less radical approach to dealing with the CCI's stated enemies and treaded carefully in Mexicalense political circles. Other group members, who considered themselves more radical, took note. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, for example, after that day's protest activities, the LAE held a special assembly in Mexicali whose purpose was to define the relationship between the LAE and the FEP. Garzón proposed that the LAE support the candidacy of FEP member Florencio Sandoval Mejía for *Diputado Federal* of Mexicali's 3<sup>rd</sup> electoral district. When he added that the LAE would support the PRI's entire slate of candidates except its challenger for the 3<sup>rd</sup> district, LAE member Julio Prado Valdez protested, "visibly disgusted", accusing the LAE of forgetting its obligations to the FEP and blaming Garzón for its lapse.<sup>41</sup> Garzón snapped and launched into a stunning, revealing response, recorded by the DFS as follows:

It is not the same being at the front of an Organization that has in its ranks more than two million campesinos, than being behind a desk, solving problems with subversive

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<sup>40</sup> Comité de Defensa bulletin, 19 June 1964; Confederación de Asociaciones Algodoneras de la República Mexicana to Asociación Algodonera del Valle de Mexicali, 21 July 1964. IIC-UABC, Colección Martínez Retes, Carpeta 1, Correspondencia.

<sup>41</sup> DFS Memorandum, 9 June 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-4-64, Bundle 1, Folios 126-129.

ideas, and as he had already said in previous occasions, the L.A.E. has no commitments with any Political Party; that its members are very free to belong to the Organization that best serves them, whether it be political or religious; that the current situation of the LAE is to be a friend of all functionaries, whether Municipal, State, or Federal, with the single aim of always keeping its doors open, to solve its problems; that it was not possible for the CCI representatives to go around sleeping one night in one place and the next in another, with the police right behind them the entire time, and this is because there are members embedded [*incrustados*] in the organization who instead of helping it, harm it; and if going forward things continue as they currently are, it will be necessary to deny certain people who continue to coexist with us.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, the futility of the FEP's radical approach coupled with police repression had pushed Garzón's patience to the limit. His involvement with the Mexicali protests helped to boost the CCI's ailing influence. Yet it had also mellowed his stance towards the government, as evidenced by the decision to support the PRI's other candidates even while challenging one of them.

U.S. observers, however, were blind to these political subtleties, and the protests in Mexicali caused considerable alarm in the Department of State. The Mexican government's tolerance of the protest activities had whipped up unprecedented popular support and press coverage of the salinity issue, unseen since the problem began in the autumn of 1961. It created intense pressure to finally resolve the dispute. In June, Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned President Johnson that "Emotions are running high in Mexico," with weekly protests in Mexicali and plans underway for a national day of protest later in the summer.<sup>43</sup> Díaz Ordaz had promised during his campaign to take the issue to the International Court if no solution were soon found. While the U.S. had a strong legal case, technically speaking, Rusk felt "rather uneasy about arguing before the International Court, where all but a few of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rusk to Johnson, 22 June 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 2: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65.



judges are from less developed countries, that Mexico is not entitled to equal treatment.”<sup>44</sup>

Rusk continued that the Department of the Interior had been working with the Committee of Fourteen on a proposal for a solution, and that Carl Hayden and the Bureau of Reclamation seemed willing to participate. He strongly urged Johnson to take the initiative and make a deal with Mexico: “More delay, accompanied by anti-American demonstrations in Mexico, may make it politically impossible for Mexico to agree to anything we would regard as reasonable.”<sup>45</sup>

Rusk’s encouragement coincided with a new round of negotiations within the IBWC-CILA, where the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos was trying a new approach. In light of the public protests, David Herrera Jordán had recommended that the CILA set aside for the time being the legal aspects of the issue and focus on a technical fix. Specifically, he urged that Mexico push for a by-pass canal that would divert Wellton-Mohawk’s water around Presa Morelos – and that it be prepared to accept that the water diverted would still count towards its annual treaty amount. The loss of water would slightly diminish the cultivable area in Mexicali but would be less harmful than having the salinity problem continue, particularly given “the serious unrest and anger among farmers and all of the social sectors of this region, with unforeseeable consequences.”<sup>46</sup>

Joseph Friedkin called Herrera at the end of June. He reported that the Departments of State and the Interior were at last working together and said he would soon have instructions about the U.S. government’s response to the by-pass canal proposal. Reflecting the pressure that the Mexicali protests had exerted on the United States, he also asked if the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Herrera Jordán to SRE, 8 June 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-137-1, Folios 21-32.

national day of protest planned for August might be postponed or cancelled now that the two countries were in negotiations again. After the call, Herrera reported to the SRE that he believed Friedkin had been ordered to negotiate in Mexico's favor, but did not yet have specific instructions.<sup>47</sup> With the August protest as a bargaining chip, Mexico's prospects for a beneficial agreement were good, and Herrera believed a high-level entreaty to Johnson would be effective.

The Comité de Defensa caught word of the re-started negotiations and telegraphed the SRE for more information. When informed that the CILA-IBWC was working on an agreement to construct a by-pass canal, the Comité agreed to suspend the weekly protests in Mexicali.<sup>48</sup> The CCI, however, did not stop its protest activities. The group continued to send information about the salinity across the country and to solicit support, and the salinity problem was mentioned wherever Danzós Palomino campaigned. The group directed its media and letter-writing campaign towards the SRE, which received dozens of letters and telegrams from across the country lending support in the negotiations and asking about their progress. The SRE received 111 such telegrams in July alone.<sup>49</sup>

In late July, Antonio Carrillo Flores met with President Johnson, Stewart Udall, Thomas Mann, and Robert Sayre. Carrillo presented Johnson with a letter from Adolfo López Mateos requesting that the United States consider constructing a by-pass canal to resolve the salinity problem.<sup>50</sup> Johnson replied favorably, promising that his government also wanted a quick solution and assuring Carrillo that the United States was currently studying

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<sup>47</sup> Memorandum of Phone Conversation, 29 June 1964. SRE, Fondo Cila, File 1-37-7, Folio 115.

<sup>48</sup> Comité to SRE and response. 17 July 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-137-3, Folios 39-41.

<sup>49</sup> List of telegrams received, July 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-1, Folios 1-5.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum of Meeting, 29 July 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-137-7, Folios 208-209.

just such a proposal. Confidentially, Johnson assured Carrillo that the other Colorado basin states took Mexico's side against Arizona.<sup>51</sup>

Soon after, CILA officials met in Mexicali with Arturo Flores Valenzuela and Rafael Martínez Retes, representatives of the Asociación Algodonera and coordinators of the Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali. The officials gave a briefing on the state of negotiations towards a resolution to the salinity problem, and asked that the August 9<sup>th</sup> national protest in Mexico City be cancelled, lest it further destabilize bi-national relations during the delicate negotiating process. The two men agreed to cancel the protest.<sup>52</sup> Immediately, Sub-Secretario de Gobernación Luis Echeverría sent telegrams to the governor and CNC leader of every state in Mexico, ordering them to cancel whatever protest activities had been planned locally, and to forbid any organizations from demonstrating. The order appears to have been a surprise, as a number of governors wrote back for clarification. Once given, all reported that the protest activities had been cancelled and demonstrations would be prohibited.<sup>53</sup>

Soon after, the CNC and Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali publicly announced that, in light of the progress made in negotiations with the United States, the protest had been cancelled.<sup>54</sup> The news shocked the CCI, which had been eagerly planning for the demonstration; it had received no warning of the cancellation and had not had the opportunity, as Flores and Martínez did, to approve the state of negotiations. Garzón wrote to the SRE complaining that it had not been consulted in the decision to cancel the protest, and

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<sup>51</sup> McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 27 July 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 2: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 144.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum of Meeting, undated, August 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-1, Folio 27.

<sup>53</sup> Various telegrams, August 1964. AGN, Galería 2, Box 1473 B, File 34.

<sup>54</sup> Comité de Defensa Press Release, August 5, 1964. IIC-UABC, Colección Martínez Retes, Carpeta 1, Correspondencia.

asking to be informed of the supposed imminent solution to the salinity protest. He was answered merely with a bland press release stating that negotiations were ongoing.<sup>55</sup>

The cancelled protest was the last straw for Garzón. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, he called a press conference at the CCI headquarters in Mexico City, and announced that Arturo Orona, Ramón Danzós Palomino, and all members of the CCI who also belonged to the Partido Comunista Mexicano had been ejected from the group. The CCI would no longer support the FEP either, he said, because it was composed mostly of communists and interfered with the CCI's main agrarian objectives.<sup>56</sup> The group's split caused a minor stir in the press that reflected its controversial founding. As the DFS reported a few days later, the "real reason [for the split] was to distance themselves [viz., Garzón and his supporters] from elements of the PCM... which are embedded in the National Directorship of the CCI."<sup>57</sup> At yet another press conference, Garzón stated that after two years, he had come to learn that working with communists was a disaster. The former members, however, had been ejected not just because they were communists, but because they were lazy, selfish, and ineffective.<sup>58</sup> Less than two years after its founding amidst great fanfare, the CCI had broken apart at the seams.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico reported that the split within the CCI had been orchestrated by PRI higher-ups, who had offered Garzón a bribe and promises of political influence in exchange for ejecting the PCM members.<sup>59</sup> I found no documentary evidence for such a deal, unsurprisingly. As later chapters show, however, Garzón did not receive any immediate benefits in terms of political influence because of the split. Indeed, the CCI's

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<sup>55</sup> CCI to José Gorostiza, 3 August 1964, and response. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-1, Folio 24.

<sup>56</sup> DFS Memorandum, 1 September 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 6, Folio 114.

<sup>57</sup> DFS Memorandum, 9 September 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 6, Folio 121.

<sup>58</sup> DFS Memorandum, 12 September 1964. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-64, Bundle 6, Folio 130.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico Airgram to Department of State, "Diaz Ordaz After Four Months – A Political Assessment," 8 April 1965. University of Arizona Libraries Digital Collections, Stewart L. Udall Papers – Colorado River, Az 372 Box 164, Folder 10.

division left the organization drifting in irrelevancy. What is more likely is that Garzón saw the writing on the wall: the CCI's oppositional stance was excluding him from involvement and influence in the imminent deal over salinity, and threatening his position in Baja California, the one area where the CCI still had significant support. Moreover, the presidential election was only a week away, and Garzón had to have known that the FEP had zero chance of making electoral gains, and a significant risk of inciting repression if it went ahead with its election campaign.

Nonetheless, the timing of the split is significant. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was elected president. In the following days, CILA-IBWC officials met to formulate a basis of understanding for a new Minute to the 1944 treaty to resolve the salinity problem. While the DFS records contain no evidence of such a deal, it is certainly possible that Garzón had PRI encouragement for expelling the PCM members.

Negotiations on the Minute continued through October and November. Mexico wanted the agreement to reserve both sides' legal rights, which meant that the agreement would be a temporary one that could be renewed or scrapped later. The United States offered Mexico two proposals. The first was the extension of tile drainage across a large portion of Wellton-Mohawk. The advantage of this option was that it would cease the pumping of underground water, which Mexico had long rejected as illegal under the treaty, and would not diminish Mexico's annual share of water. The tile drainage would instead send Mexico Wellton-Mohawk's return waters as normally understood under the treaty. The disadvantage was that the salinity of water that Mexico received would still be relatively high: close to 2000 ppm, according to the IBWC. The second option was a by-pass canal that would divert the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk around Presa Morelos. The advantage of this option

is that the overall salinity of Mexico's waters would decrease to below 1500 ppm. The disadvantage would be that it would count the water bypassed around the dam to Mexico's annual treaty amount, even though Mexico could not use it for irrigation. Mexican officials leaned towards the by-pass canal option.

While the IBWC/CILA, Departments of State and the Interior, and the Bureau of Reclamation negotiated, President Johnson invited President-Elect Gustavo Díaz Ordaz for a visit to his Texas ranch. The invitation, which Díaz Ordaz gladly accepted, marked the beginning of what appears to be a genuine friendship between the two men, and a closer alignment of Mexican and U.S. relations on many issues. Salinity was discussed at the meeting: Díaz Ordaz said that he “was confident that the International Court would hold that the water users on the right bank of the river were entitled to the same quality of water as those on the left bank” but was trusting – as Johnson agreed – that a legal solution to the problem would not be necessary.<sup>60</sup> The two men also discussed communism and Cuba, and while Díaz Ordaz repeated the Mexican policy of national self-determination, he added that if the chips were down, Mexico would side with the United States, and that he was confident that it was merely doing what it had to do in North Vietnam and Cyprus. Antonio Carrillo Flores informed the Department of State that this was “a very important statement” indicating a willingness for closer relations between the two countries.<sup>61</sup>

By November, CILA officials had chosen the by-pass canal option. They now needed only to hammer out the details and get Mexicalense opinion on side. To this end, David Herrera Jordán met with representatives from the Comité de Defensa. As he explained it, he

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<sup>60</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 16 November 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 61, Folder 6: Díaz Ordaz Visit, Document 36b.

<sup>61</sup> Continuation of Memorandum of Conversation, 16 November 1964. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 61, Folder 6: Díaz Ordaz Visit, Document 39b.

skillfully maneuvered them into freely opting for the by-pass canal by presenting both options seemingly impartially, so that “they would themselves reach the same conclusion as the Commission and in that way win their frank support for the solution.”<sup>62</sup> As he predicted, they voted for the canal.

By December, the agreement had nearly been finalized. Under the proposal, the United States would extend the canal carrying saline water from Wellton-Mohawk to Presa Morelos. It would also construct control gate works at the dam so that the water from Wellton-Mohawk could be directed above the dam, thus combining with the irrigation water diverted into the Álamo Canal, or below it, where it would join the channel of the Colorado and flow to the sea. For most of the year, the water from Wellton-Mohawk would be blended in with the rest of Mexico’s water; the high volume Mexico received over the summer would dilute the salinity to a safe level. The Wellton-Mohawk district would attempt to pump from its least saline wells during this time. For three months during the winter, Mexico would reduce its water deliveries to the minimum permitted under the Treaty, 900 cubic feet per second. During this period, the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk (about 300 cubic feet per second) would be bypassed around Morelos Dam, and Wellton-Mohawk would pump from its most saline wells. The volume diverted around the dam would still count towards Mexico’s annual treaty amount, but it would be the minimum possible amount and salinity would be kept to a safe level in the water that flowed into the Álamo Canal. Mexico agreed to the plan in January, and the White House took it to the Committee of Fourteen for approval.

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<sup>62</sup> Luis Cabrera to SRE, 26 November 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-139-1, Folios 115-117.

The deal was nearly scuttled at the last minute by Carl Hayden and the Wellton-Mohawk District. Arizona's representatives on the Committee of Fourteen told Robert Sayre that the Wellton-Mohawk District wanted to increase its cultivated area from the current amount of 62,000 acres the full 75,000 acre allotment it had first been designed for, in order to spread the repayment contract for the works to more farmers. Obviously, the extra acreage would increase the input of salinity into the river, undercutting the entire agreement. Sayre grudgingly agreed to grant Wellton-Mohawk a renegotiation of its repayment contract in exchange for its cooperation, thus lowering farmers' fees.<sup>63</sup> The Arizona delegates also demanded that the agreement include written assurance that Wellton-Mohawk's drainage water would satisfy the stipulations of the Supreme Court ruling in the *California vs. Arizona* case, decided the year before in Arizona's favor, which forced California to relinquish millions of acre-feet of claimed water rights to Arizona and reconfigured the Colorado River Compact. As Sayre put it, "This really has nothing to do with the dispute with Mexico. However, Arizona wants to insist that Interior rule now in favor of Wellton-Mohawk on a possible future legal fight with other U.S. water users, in return for Wellton-Mohawk's agreement to the international settlement. I do not blame Wellton-Mohawk for doing this, but it is dirty pool."<sup>64</sup> With the deal with Mexico hanging in the balance, Stewart Udall eventually resolved the problem by promising Carl Hayden that the Bureau would construct a 17-well drainage project in the Yuma Valley.<sup>65</sup> Water pumped from the wells would be delivered to Mexico, reserving Colorado River water for Arizona. As the next chapter will

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<sup>63</sup> Sayre to Bundy, 27 January 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 169.

<sup>64</sup> Sayre to Bundy, 27 January 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 169.

<sup>65</sup> Sayre to Bundy, 22 March 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 175a.



show, these wells soon created further tensions with Mexico, but in the meantime, a solution to the long-standing salinity problem finally seemed at hand.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was inaugurated President of Mexico. The five living ex-Presidents – López Mateos, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Miguel Alemán, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Abelardo Rodríguez – stood behind Díaz Ordaz at the inauguration, an unambiguous display of PRI unity clearly designed to symbolically end the tensions pulling the PRI from left and right following the Cuban Revolution. As Fulton Freeman, the new U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, gushed, PRI stability stood in marked contrast to the instability and turmoil threatening the hemisphere. “Mexico’s economic and political prospects have never been brighter.”<sup>66</sup> With the Chamizal settlement, the imminent salinity agreement, and Mexico enthusiastically contributing to the Alliance for Progress, he said, U.S.-Mexican relations had never been better, either.

Alfonso Garzón and the CCI stood on uncertain ground. Following the September 1<sup>st</sup> expulsion of Orona, Danzós Palomino, and nine other members of the Executive Committee, Garzón led both groups in a conciliatory, obsequious attitude towards the ruling party. Not all group members were happy with this new course, however. According to the DFS, Braulio Maldonado attended its annual congress in early January “in order to end the differences that exist among some members and the leaders of the CCI.”<sup>67</sup> At the Congress the CCI voted in a new National Executive Committee, purged of Orona and Danzós supporters and other Communist Party sympathizers. At the congress, attended by about 800 people, Garzón spoke about the need to keep fighting for a solution to the salinity problem, and held up the Liga Agraria Estatal as evidence that concrete actions could be accomplished without

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<sup>66</sup> Memorandum for Marvin Watson, 10 February 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 173.

<sup>67</sup> DFS Report, 5 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 7, Folio 160.

working with Communists. Francisco Díaz Echerivel spoke about problems with water distribution in the Distrito de Riego, while other speakers attacked the Partido Comunista de México and Orona and Danzós.<sup>68</sup>

A few weeks later, Garzón was in Mexicali for the annual *Asalto a las Tierras* celebration (commemorating the first campesino invasions of land owned by the Colorado River Development Company in Mexicali in 1937), but first he met with Dr. Lauro Ortega, Secretary General of the PRI National Executive Committee. Responding to rumors that he was trying to return the CCI to the PRI fold, Garzón told the press that “it would be the members of the C.C.I. who would decide if they return to the ranks of the P.R.I., and that through the L.A.E. the C.C.I. would try to obtain posts for popular election” as well as fighting the salinity.<sup>69</sup> A few days after Garzón’s arrival, about six thousand people attended the LAE-led celebration of the *Asalto a las Tierras* in Mexicali, where the group’s conciliatory attitude was on full display. A representative of the state government applauded the presence of a CNC representative, and the apparent unification of the campesino class this symbolized. Garzón elaborated, claiming there were no disagreements between the CNC and the CCI. “He said that together, both centrals must fight for a common goal: lifting up the campesinos and achieving an Integral Agrarian Reform and added that he would fight against the extremists of the left and right, for the distribution of latifundios and fraudulent smallholdings”.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, LAE representative Juan Rodríguez Meza attended the

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<sup>68</sup> DFS Report, 5 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 7, Folio 164.

<sup>69</sup> DFS Report, 26 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-965, Bundle 13 Folio 408.

<sup>70</sup> Tarjeta, 30 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-65, Bundle 14, Folio 14.

CNC's celebration of the Asalto, where he made a speech saying the two groups should work together.<sup>71</sup>

Many LAE and CCI members disagreed with the groups' new approach. The DFS reported that "[t]here exists a marked division within this organization... as [Garzón] as well as Francisco Díaz Echerivel are considered irresponsible towards the campesinos and their problems, which they no longer try to solve as they have agreements with the Government that gives them money".<sup>72</sup> Other members were angry that Garzón had continually repressed efforts to organize women, despite the existence of a Secretary of Female Action led by Agripina Carrillo, and some ejidos had begun to form their own female action groups without waiting for the LAE's approval. Another group had begun trying to get CCI members to switch their allegiances to Orona and Danzós (who maintained another group also called the CCI, which the DFS and Garzón group called la CCI-Roja or "Red" CCI), while the Guanajuato contingent threatened to leave the CCI if Ismael Villanueva did not resign.<sup>73</sup>

Garzón did not change course. He and Díaz Echerivel met with the Baja California delegate of the PRI National Executive Committee, Rufo Figueroa, in early February and agreed that the LAE would support the PRI's designation of Senator José Ricardi Tirado as interim state governor (the former governor, Eligio Esquivel, had died of a heart attack in December).<sup>74</sup> Days later, on February 15<sup>th</sup>, the LAE expelled Feliciano Correa, a member of the Executive Committee, for criticizing "the change in political trajectory of the Liga" and for authoring and distributing pamphlets that attacked Garzón and Díaz Echerivel. Correa declared afterwards that the expulsions of himself, Orona, Danzós and others had left Garzón

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<sup>71</sup> Informe, 27 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-65, Bundle 14, Folio 14-19.

<sup>72</sup> Tarjeta, 11 February 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-2-65, Bundle 1, Folio 101.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Tarjeta, 15 February 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-65, Bundle 2, Folio 61.

with a minority portion of the group's one-time membership.<sup>75</sup> In early March, despite complaints from various CCI state committees that Garzón and Humberto Serrano Pérez were no longer attending to the problems of campesinos, Garzón said that he had offered Carlos Madrazo the support of the LAE for the PRI's political activities and instructed Díaz Echerivel to start the process of affiliating LAE members to the PRI.<sup>76</sup>

For the moment, however, the CCI's newfound loyalty to the PRI did not bring about a noticeable change in the group's fortunes. An incident on March 16<sup>th</sup> showed this. A group of CCI members (70, according to the DFS; 500, according to the CCI) went to the offices of the *Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización* (Department of Agrarian Affairs and Colonization) of the SAG to deliver petitions for land, water, and credit. When told that the DAAC would consider their petitions the following Thursday, the group said it would stay in the DAAC offices until their petitions were answered. The police ejected them from the building at 10:45 that evening.<sup>77</sup> In response the CCI released a press bulletin asking the DAAC to respect the President's signature on various Presidential Accords benefitting farmers. The incident recalled the CCI's repeated earlier frustrations with the DAAC and its frequent run-ins with the police.

The salinity agreement was signed on March 22nd, 1965, as Minute 218 to the 1944 Waters Treaty. After such a long fight over the agreement, the actual signing was anti-climactic. Antonio Carrillo Flores, promoted to Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores in Díaz Ordaz's cabinet, rejected the idea of a public signing ceremony in Mexico City, as he thought

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<sup>75</sup> Tarjeta, 17 February 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-65, Bundle 14, Folio 87.

<sup>76</sup> Tarjeta, 6 March 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 8, Folio 32.

<sup>77</sup> Tarjeta, 18 March 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 8, Folio 72.

the “Minute is potentially subject to considerable criticism in both countries”.<sup>78</sup> Friedkin agreed, and the Minute was signed without fanfare in the CILA’s offices in Ciudad Juárez.

The agreement did leave some Mexicalenses less than enthused. Part of the issue was that the massive protest campaign of the previous spring had raised the rhetorical stakes of the salinity issue to lofty heights. The salinity problem had been painted as the very defense of national sovereignty and the Mexican Revolution. In mid December, for example, the head of the LAE’s Female Action Committee, Agripina Carrillo, had written to Díaz Ordaz, imploring him not to accept the U.S. proposal for a by-pass canal: “Reason supports us; neither the canal nor the drains will guarantee our rights... The feeling of the people, which as patriotic Mexicans and soldiers we know how to defend, [is that] we understand that you, as our guide, as a Mexican and as a Lawyer [*Licenciado en Derecho*] will know how to respond to the longings of those who, as selfless wives of the men who through force of will and sacrifice converted this corner of the homeland’s soil [*suelo patrio*] into fertile and productive lands, conserving for our families the patrimony that the Revolution put into our hands.”<sup>79</sup> Minute 218, which was essentially a compromise that skirted the legal questions of the salinity issue, could not hope to match such a soaring vision.

Within the Johnson administration, meanwhile, satisfaction at having finally reached an agreement with Mexico was deflated by trepidation that a similar issue could erupt and erase the work achieved so far. As Sayre wrote to Bundy a few days before the agreement was signed, “The proposed salinity agreement with Mexico gets us out of our current problem and hopefully will give us a five-year truce. It does not change the basic policy,

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<sup>78</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, IBWC Commissioners, 5 March 1965. LBJ, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson; Confidential File Oversize Attachments; Box 165, Folder: C.F. Oversize Attachments: From Packet 4/22/66 “Colorado River Salinity” [1 of 4], Document 9.

<sup>79</sup> LAE to Díaz Ordaz, 16 December 1964. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-139-1, Folios 166-167.

aggressively pursued by Reclamation, to give Mexico as much drainage water as possible from U.S. irrigation district [sic] so that it cuts down requirements on stored water. If we continue to pursue this policy, I believe we are in for trouble.”<sup>80</sup> Trouble appeared only a few days later, when Mexico’s nemesis Carl Hayden gave “signs of backing out of his part of the bargain”, with his staffers Roy Elson and Ed Davis now claiming that Arizona would only cooperate if the President approved the Pacific Southwest Water Plan, a massive plan following the *California v. Arizona* decision to provide Arizona with millions of acre feet of water a year.<sup>81</sup>

In early April, Bundy penned a memorandum to the Secretaries of State and Interior summarizing the achievement of Minute 218 and looking to the future of water use in the border region. Judging from the memorandum, the administration had endorsed the Mexican argument that no matter what the treaty might say, neighbors had to treat each other fairly: “One of the conclusions that the two Departments have apparently reached, after more than three years of work on the Wellton-Mohawk problem, is that the United States has an obligation to act reasonably in conducting irrigation in the United States.”<sup>82</sup> However, he warned, the underlying legal issue had not been resolved: the United States believed it had the right to deliver underground water to Mexico as part of its treaty amount, as long as individual irrigation projects were kept in salt balance. Mexico still held that the United States had no right to deliver only drainage water to Mexico, and that drainage water should be divided between Mexico and the seven U.S. states. “If, as is apparently generally

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<sup>80</sup> Sayre to Bundy, 17 March 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 174.

<sup>81</sup> Sayre to Bundy, 22 March 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 175a.

<sup>82</sup> Bundy to Secretaries of State and Interior, 6 April 1965. LBJ, NSF, Country File – Mexico; Box 59, Folder 3: Mexico, Volume 1, Memos 12/63-12/65, Document 177a.

expected, the overall quality of water in the Colorado continues to deteriorate, it would be to Mexico's interest to test its legal theory. On the other hand, it is in our interest to avoid such a test."<sup>83</sup>

While uncertainty already surrounded the just-signed Minute, there was no ambiguity about what the salinity agreement and election of Díaz Ordaz meant for Mexico's national politics. In April, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico produced a lengthy report on Díaz Ordaz's first four months in office. Díaz Ordaz's rule, the report said, signified the return of PRI strength and unity. Carlos Madrazo had replaced Alfonso Corona del Rosal as President of the party and had already commenced a "house cleaning of the Party leadership all the way down to the grassroots level... To some cynical observers these high sounding aims are nothing more than window dressing for a spoils system operation aimed at providing rewards for Madrazo's people and making sure that key party positions are occupied by loyal Diaz Ordaz supporters. Both views may be correct."<sup>84</sup> Díaz Ordaz had declared a major focus on agrarian issues, promising to expropriate illegal latifundios and distribute them without waiting for campesino petitions, as had been the previous policy. It also noted "a determination on Diaz Ordaz' part to curb firmly any leftist excesses", including some signs that the government was open to rapprochement with Alfonso Garzón and the communist-purged CCI.<sup>85</sup> Even better, Diaz Ordaz seemed more willing to distance Mexico from Cuba and to control the activities of Cubans in Mexico (although it noted he would not likely break relations). As for relations with the United States, the report noted that "[w]ith the recent practical solution of the problem experienced since 1961 as regards the salinity of Colorado

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico Airgram to Department of State, "Diaz Ordaz After Four Months – A Political Assessment," 8 April 1965. University of Arizona Libraries Digital Collections, Stewart L. Udall Papers – Colorado River, Az 372 Box 164, Folder 10.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

River waters delivered to Mexico, relations between the U. S. and Mexico have achieved a level of cordiality probably unequaled in the history of the two countries.” A hand-written note on the cover of the report underscored the point: “It shows Mexico is going in the right direction. We need very much to keep it so.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.



## **Chapter Five**

### **Mexicali Under Minute 218**

Minute 218 worked, but it did not make a difference. The agreement's measures alleviated the problem of salinity from the Wellton-Mohawk region and kept the salinity of Mexicali's irrigation water to a safe level around 1300 ppm (with a few spikes above that). But at virtually the same time that the Minute came into effect, other water issues arose that threatened Mexicali agriculture just as severely as salinity had, albeit without the obvious external culprit. Bi-national squabbles over groundwater and salinity continued, while planning for a major effort to improve Mexicali's irrigation and drainage infrastructure caused friction among Mexicalense farmers. Finally, increasingly severe infestations of the pink bollworm starting in 1965 combined with a drop in the global price for cotton to devastate Mexicali's agricultural economy. These factors kept popular unrest simmering despite the achievements of Minute 218. In 1968 that unrest manifested itself at the ballot box in an unprecedented victory by the opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* – a result which the PRI quickly nullified to widespread anger, instead appointing unelected municipal councils to govern.

Alfonso Garzón and the CCI drifted in the doldrums of political irrelevancy for the first several years after the group's late-1964 split. The group's efforts to return to the PRI fold drove away members who had formerly been attracted by its radical stance. Yet its newly-declared loyalty won it no gains of influence within the ruling party, similarly alienating members who cared more about results than political affiliation. The 1968 elections fiasco ironically gave the CCI its long-awaited entry into the structure of PRI influence, when the group's willingness to support the PRI-imposed municipal councils won

it a position on one of them, the group's first political post. The chapter shows that while the CCI's schism in 1964 weakened the group, changing environmental and economic conditions in Mexicali set the stage for its return to political influence. The decline of Mexicali's infrastructure and cotton economy diminished the ruling party's traction in the region. As the decade wore on, the PRI would increasingly depend on the loyalty of the CCI to maintain the ruling party's tenuous hold on Baja California's politics.

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After being signed on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, Minute 218 was to go into effect in October, when construction of the by-pass canal from Wellton-Mohawk to Presa Morelos was scheduled to finish. A construction workers' strike in Arizona delayed the completion, an irony for a region that had long felt victimized by its neighboring state.<sup>1</sup> Finally, on November 16, 1965, at 4:00 P.M., the first flow of water from Wellton-Mohawk poured into the diversion canal and splashed into the Colorado River just below Presa Morelos. At that instant, Minute 218's five-year term went into effect.

From the perspective of the engineers and technicians in the CILA and SRH, Minute 218 worked well. It gave the flexibility to either combine or separate the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk with Mexicali's water from the Colorado River, depending on the river's volume. During the high-flow summer months, Mexicali need not waste the water from Wellton-Mohawk, while during the low-flow winter months it could avoid the danger of salinity. While the water from Wellton-Mohawk diverted below Morelos Dam counted towards Mexico's treaty amount, the volume – about 54,000 acre-feet – came only to around 3.5% of Mexico's annual share. By contrast, the volume lost to evaporation, infiltration into

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<sup>1</sup> Report from David Herrera Jordán, 7 July 1965. SRE, Fondo CILA, Folder C-140-1, Folio 31.

the ground, through transpiration from the plants and weeds that sprouted in canals, and from other infrastructural inefficiencies was estimated to be a whopping 600,000 acre-feet per year – 40% of Mexico’s annual total.<sup>2</sup> Minute 218, by comparison, wasted a negligible amount and brought considerable benefits.

For farmers, Minute 218 seemed less appealing. Many noticed no immediate improvement in their crop production under the new agreement. The salinity had exacerbated many existing problems, and while the Minute abated salinity, it did little for the other underlying issues. Mexicali’s irrigation and drainage infrastructure, for example, was grossly inefficient. Much of it had been constructed at the beginning of the century by the Colorado Development Company and the Colorado River Land Company, and had had little improvement since. The astonishing volume of water cited above was lost because of Mexicali’s aging water system. Unlined canals let water soak into the ground and created habitat for plants and reeds that sucked up water and wasted through transpiration, while choking the canals, slowing the flow of water and giving it more time to evaporate under the scorching desert sun. A farmer whose plot lay at the very end of a canal might not receive their full volume of water, even if the technicians had opened the gates – it simply dried up or soaked into the ground before it got there. Drainage infrastructure was in an even worse condition. Drainage was achieved through highly inefficient ditch drainage, many of which had eroded or silted up, reducing their effectiveness. Wells provided more effective drainage, but they were expensive to construct and maintain and so many farmers did not have them.

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<sup>2</sup> Report, 25 June 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-1, Folio 122.



*An irrigation canal overgrown with vegetation, which causes water loss through transpiration and reduces the canal's volume and efficiency. The machinery at left is part of an effort to clear canals of vegetation. Source: Archivo Histórico del Agua, Colección Fotográfica.*



*A deteriorating drainage ditch, which is eroding and filling with silt. Such a ditch can only lower the water a few feet in the adjacent areas. Many parts of the region lacked even this form of drainage infrastructure. Source: Archivo Histórico del Agua, Colección Fotográfica.*

Moreover, calibrating the mixture of water to dilute the salinity of the Wellton-Mohawk flow proved difficult. Technicians had to calculate Mexicali's water needs based on the phase of the growing season, select which wells in the Wellton-Mohawk to pump from (since some produced more saline water than others), decide what volume of Wellton-Mohawk water to mix with Colorado River water, and align all this with Mexico's yearly water requirements. The process required coordination between the Wellton-Mohawk district, the Distrito de Riego, and both sections of the IBWC-CILA.

The inevitable errors caused tensions. In May 1966, for example, Mexico increased its water delivery for the summer cotton season for the first time under Minute 1966. The salinity was much higher than expected, for as David Herrera Jordán reported, the Wellton-Mohawk district had been pumping from the wrong wells. While the error was corrected, further tensions arose when the Distrito de Riego blamed the CILA for water shortages caused by its own mismanagement. As Herrera put it, "since the Colorado River salinity problem began, we have seen that the management of the Colorado River Irrigation District has tried to make the Commission responsible for some of the many problems in the District because of scarcity of water. The undersigned in no way minimizes the responsibilities of this Office, but can not, and will not, take on responsibilities that do not belong to it."<sup>3</sup>

These tensions arose because the two agencies' objectives were not always aligned. The CILA's job for Mexicali was to minimize salinity, which required wasting a certain volume of the Wellton-Mohawk water around Presa Morelos. The Distrito's mandate, on the other hand, was to provide as much water to as many farmers as possible, sometimes tempting the use of the Wellton-Mohawk water despite its salinity. A month later, Herrera

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<sup>3</sup> Herrera Jordán to Alberto Barnetche González, 16 May 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, Fil C-140-1, Folios 108-109.

elaborated to José Hernández Terán, the Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos. He warned that the mixture of water blended by the CILA from Wellton-Mohawk and Colorado River waters had been excessively saline for the past two months, creating considerable anger among farmers. The Distrito de Riego had demanded such a high volume of water, he explained, that 5,000,000 cubic meters (about 4,000 acre-feet) of saline water from Wellton-Mohawk that should have been diverted around Presa Morelos had instead been sent into the Alamo Canal. The results – a larger area irrigated with higher salinity water – did not “justify the unrest and anger they are producing among farmers and the unfavorable consequences these could have for our Government.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the rise in Mexicali’s irrigation water – mitigated by Minute 218, but still higher than it had been prior to 1961 – and the region’s decrepit drainage infrastructure, prudent soil husbandry would suggest that farmers reduce their acreage under irrigation, but not their total volume of irrigation water. The extra volume of water would help wash dissolved minerals through the root zone, preventing soil accumulation in the soil. But many farmers, hoping to maximize yields, could not resist the temptation to irrigate as large an area as possible. Moreover, the predominant irrigation method in the region was flood irrigation, in which a farmer siphons water onto a plot, literally flooding the furrows. This method is inefficient and conducive to salinization, with a considerable volume of water lost to evaporation, leaving its dissolved mineral content on the surface. These tendencies coupled with Mexicali’s outdated irrigation infrastructure kept the demand for water high despite the risk posed by salinity.

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<sup>4</sup> Herrera Jordán to Hernández Terán, 25 June 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-1, Folios 116-117.

Even as these internal issues arose, further bi-national water tensions kept Mexicalenses' anger simmering against the United States. In late 1964, the Mexican



*Flood irrigation under way in Mexicali. The tubes siphon water into the plot from the canal in the foreground, flooding each furrow. Enormous volumes of water are lost to evaporation with this method. Source: Archivo Histórico del Agua, Colección Fotográfica.*

government had caught word of the so-called Udall Plan – officially the Pacific Southwest Water Plan – for water development in the Lower Colorado, part of which called for the construction of seventeen wells, later increased to eighteen, in the Yuma Mesa – a deal-sweetener to convince Carl Hayden to endorse Minute 218. The planned wells caused great alarm among Mexicalenses. To understand why requires some background on groundwater's importance and nature in Mexicali. Hydrologists urge us to visualize groundwater and surface water together, rather than separate, as part of the same water system (except “closed” aquifers, which do not pertain here). What happens above ground affects what

happens below ground, and vice versa. Like water on the surface, groundwater flows downhill, albeit much more slowly, as well as towards areas of lower saturation; its flow rate depends on the porosity of the substrate through which it moves. The infiltration of water from the Colorado River created a large area of water-saturated earth beneath the river, flowing slowly in the same direction as the surface river. This flow pooled beneath the Mexicali Valley, forming the aquifer from which its wells drew (the aquifer was also recharged by the infiltration of water into the ground from irrigation canals and from irrigation itself).

Groundwater exploitation had accelerated dramatically in Mexicali starting in 1955, the year that for the first time Mexico received no more water than the 1.5 million acre-feet stipulated by the treaty. To make up the shortfall, farmers increasingly turned to groundwater to irrigate their fields. By the time the salinity crisis began in 1961, hundreds of wells across the Valley irrigated between 60,000-75,000 hectares of cotton, approximately one third of the total cultivated land. Groundwater acceleration had skyrocketed even more after the salinity problem arose, as more and more farmers turned to wells to replace or augment the increasingly saline supply of surface water. Indeed, following 1961 groundwater tended to be of higher quality than water from the river; the record-breaking cotton harvests of 1962 and 1963 had been achieved thanks to wells. The availability of groundwater, therefore, had become extremely important to Mexicali's future. Yet the Treaty of 1944 had no provisions governing groundwater, besides obliging each country to consult the other on developments that might affect its supply of groundwater. With no definition of that supply, however, the rule was fuzzy. The absence of regulation, moreover, created a perverse incentive for each side to pump as much groundwater as possible, without regard for recharge rates or long-



term sustainability. Under the doctrine of prior appropriation, the first party to put a source of water to beneficial use won the perpetual right to that source of water. For example, in 1969 the SRH released a report that warned of a severe overdraft in the Mexicali aquifer from the hundreds of wells in the region. Yet the report also expressly recommended that Mexico *increase* its exploitation of groundwater, in order to stake a legal claim to it before United States users could put it to use.<sup>5</sup>



*A well constructed by the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos in the Mexicali Valley. SRH-operated public and cotton industry-financed private wells multiplied in number as the volume and quality of surface water diminished from 1955 onwards, with deleterious effects on Mexicali's aquifer. Source: Archivo Histórico del Agua, Colección Fotográfica.*

The planned wells in the Yuma Mesa worried Mexicalenses for two reasons. First, heavy pumping from the wells could diminish the southward flow of groundwater that helped recharge the aquifer beneath the Mexicali Valley. Furthermore, Mexicalenses worried that

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<sup>5</sup> SRH Report, 2 December 1969. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-4, Folio 23.

the United States would deliver water from these wells to Mexico as part of its treaty amount, instead of surface water from the Colorado's main streambed. This would mean that water that Mexicali once drew from underground would be intercepted and delivered instead as part of its surface water, a double reduction in the region's water supply. Furthermore, it reawakened one of the most contentious issues of the salinity dispute which Minute 218 had skirted: did the United States have the right to deliver groundwater to Mexico as part of its treaty amount?

In October 1965, before Minute 218 had even come into effect, the Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali reconvened to discuss the planned wells. The committee members considered the wells an even more dangerous problem than the salinity from Wellton-Mohawk had been, according to secret police agents, because they could drastically reduce the amount of groundwater available in Mexicali.<sup>6</sup> The following June the Committee wrote to President Díaz Ordaz and asked that a geo-hydrological study of the Mexicali Valley be carried out. They worried that the wells' cone of depression – the change of gradient in the shape of an inverted cone created in the water table surrounding a well, also called a cone of extraction – could not only reduce Mexicali's aquifer recharge but completely reverse the underground flow of water, causing Mexicali's groundwater to flow back into the United States.<sup>7</sup> In response to Mexican protests against the wells, the Department of State promised in November 1966 that the wells were merely test wells to measure underground water flows, and that they would not interfere with the recharge of the Mexicali aquifer.<sup>8</sup> That was not completely true: while the wells may have been intended to be partly

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<sup>6</sup> Report, 15 October 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-965, bundle 30, folio 18.

<sup>7</sup> Comité de Defensa to Díaz Ordaz, 8 June 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-1, Folio 113.

<sup>8</sup> Department of State to Hugo Margáin, 21 November 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-1, Folios 192-196.

experimental, their express purpose was to intercept groundwater flows and deliver it to Mexico, reserving the higher quality surface water for Arizona.<sup>9</sup>

Construction of the wells was in fact deferred for years. But the plans contributed to a simmering tension between the two countries. A meeting in December 1966 between Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos José Hernández Terán and Interior Secretary Stewart Udall was emblematic. Although he described the meeting as “cordial,” Hernández reported that the meeting had not solved the fundamental legal disagreement: the United States believed it had the right to deliver Mexico underground waters as part of its treaty amount, while Mexico disagreed. When Hernández asked Udall why the underground water might not be delivered to U.S. users instead of Mexico, Udall told him that those users had contracts guaranteeing them surface water. Hernández replied that Mexico had a contract too: the 1944 Waters Treaty.<sup>10</sup> Thus began what Evan Ward has called the “War of the Wells,” in which both countries threatened to construct deeper, higher capacity wells along the border in order to create cones of depression that would suck groundwater from beneath the other country.<sup>11</sup> It was a war, however, mostly on paper. Construction of the Yuma Mesa wells began in 1967 and finished in 1970, but they were not put into operation, partly due to Mexican opposition.

In October 1966, another minor crisis erupted. At the end of the cotton season, Mexicali reduced its water deliveries and began by-passing the water from Wellton-Mohawk around Presa Morelos. Salinity should have dropped, but instead it jumped to around 1300 ppm. Investigating the anomaly, the CILA discovered that the Bureau of Reclamation had put into operation a drainage project in the Gila Sur district close to Yuma. The new project

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<sup>9</sup> Evan R Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Summary of Meeting, 7 December 1966. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-1, Folios 224-228.

<sup>11</sup> Ward, *Border Oasis*, Ibid.

essentially recreated the Wellton-Mohawk on a smaller scale: it pumped saline water from underground and dumped it into the Gila River just above its confluence with the Colorado. The salinity input, about 69,000 acre-feet per year of water with 2,350 ppm salinity, was much lower than what Wellton-Mohawk had produced.<sup>12</sup> But what rankled Mexicans was the willful ignorance of the principles of fairness which Mexicans had demanded since 1961. The Gila Sur drainage belied U.S. promises of good faith and respect and reinforced Mexicalenses' sense of anger at the United States, as well as generalized dissatisfaction with Minute 218.<sup>13</sup> As José Rojas Garcidueñas, a legal advisor to the CILA, put it,

one year after putting the bypass canal into operation, which took so much effort to negotiate, the Wellton-Mohawk water was being completely wasted, and part of it charged to Mexico's treaty amount, and in spite of that sacrifice the water that reached Presa Morelos continued to have 50% higher salinity than it should have. Other saline waters, apart from Wellton-Mohawk, were and are being dumped into the Colorado River and contaminating international waters, in total contradiction of the spirit and intention that guided the negotiations for the practical, temporary solution of the bypass canal and in contradiction of the intentions declared by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.<sup>14</sup>

Yet in spite of the callous disregard for Mexico that the Gila Sur project represented, Mexican officials did not pursue diplomatic efforts to mitigate it or shut it down. The reasons are not clear from the documents, but there are grounds to speculate. The salt input from the Gila Sur project was small enough to keep Mexicali's irrigation water below the 1,500 ppm threshold considered safe. Minute 218, moreover, had just gone into effect after years of negotiations. It is possible that Mexican officials felt that the new project, insulting though it was, did not merit risking the hard-won agreement. This is especially likely because, after the

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<sup>12</sup> Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *La salinidad del Río Colorado: una diferencia internacional*. (Tlatelolco, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1975), 54.

<sup>13</sup> Herrera Jordán to Luis Cabrera, 14 November 1968. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-4, Folios 156-157.

<sup>14</sup> José Rojas Garcidueñas, *El Problema de la Salinidad de las Aguas Entregadas a México en el Río Colorado*, March 1967. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-139-3, Folio 53.

new Minute's signing, official attention turned to the domestic dimensions of Mexicali's water troubles.

One of the most important effects of Minute 218 for Mexicali's water authorities was that it cancelled the sense of uncertainty about the future water supply and cleared the way for much-needed improvements to Mexicali's water infrastructure. In many ways, the uproar over Wellton-Mohawk had distracted from the very real problems of the Distrito de Riego. From the mid-1950s, the Distrito de Riego and SRH had recognized that irrigation practices and infrastructure in the Valley were leading to the build-up of mineral content in the soil. The input of salinity from Wellton-Mohawk had made the issue much more urgent, but it had also postponed efforts to restore Mexicalense irrigation.

With Minute 218 signed, however, the SRH began planning a major effort to improve the efficiency of irrigation in the Mexicali Valley, called *el Proyecto de Rehabilitación del Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado* (Colorado River Irrigation District Rehabilitation Project). Gustavo Díaz Ordaz spoke in favor of the gestating plan when he visited Mexicali in 1964 as a presidential candidate.<sup>15</sup> The following year the SRH began studies for the project and efforts to secure funding from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Inter-American Development Bank. By 1966 the plans had been completed. They involved wide measures to improve the efficiency of irrigation, including the lining of canals with concrete, to prevent water infiltration into the soil; the construction of new control works; the repair of existing wells and the construction of new ones; the leveling of agricultural lands to prevent runoff, the construction of roads and telephone service; the diversification of the crops grown in the Valley; the purchase of machinery to

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<sup>15</sup> Oscar Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola del valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C., México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1990), 211.

maintain the infrastructure; and, perhaps most importantly, the compaction of the Distrito de Riego into a smaller surface area.<sup>16</sup>

The Rehabilitation Project in general, and the latter provision in particular, garnered a great deal of controversy among Mexicalense farmers. While virtually all recognized the need for improvement, agreeing on the execution of the plan proved more difficult to achieve. The compaction plan was the most contentious issue. Agriculture in Mexicali had been developed sporadically over decades, with no central planning: as the lands of the Colorado River Land Company were sold, expropriated and divided, land was put into production in a haphazard fashion. The result was that the Distrito de Riego encompassed an area of more than 350,000 hectares. Yet water users only irrigated about 180,000 hectares within that area. Irrigation water had further to travel in canals to reach those who needed it, and a huge amount was lost to evaporation, infiltration, and transpiration from the vegetation that grew in the dirt-lined canals. The compaction plan called for the surface area of the Distrito to be reduced to a smaller, more densely-cultivated area, so that water could be provisioned through shorter canals.

While many agreed to the plan in principle, it brought vociferous opposition. Much of it came from those farmers who would be relocated under the plan. Since the maximum tides in the Colorado River Delta reach four meters above sea level, and because effective drainage infrastructure needs to be dug at least three meters below the soil, the SRH engineers redrew the Distrito's southern boundary at the point where land stood eight meters above sea level. Plotted on maps in black ink, the so-called "Black Line" was vigorously rejected as incorrect or arbitrary by the farmers who lived south of it. Many had lived on and

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<sup>16</sup> Adalberto Walther Meade, *El valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C.: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1996), 158.

cultivated their plots for twenty years or more, and resisted, for reasons easy to surmise, their forced moving.

To convince these farmers, the SRH promised to give them new lands of equal or greater value to their old ones (by giving them un-owned land, and land bought from colonos who owned more land than they had irrigation rights to), to indemnify them for the price of buildings or improvements left on their previous plots, and to allow them to continue to own the land they would leave behind. In the end, many agreed. But finding new land within the redrawn Distrito de Riego proved even more challenging. Many pequeños propietarios, while owning lands far in excess of the area to which they had irrigation rights, refused to sell their excess lands at the price offered by the SRH. The standoff lasted for six years, until President Echeverría decreed land expropriations in 1972 and 1974, claiming 18,906 hectares; eventually 1,812 farmers were relocated under the program.<sup>17</sup>

The scale of the Rehabilitation Project entailed enormous costs, the second major point of contention among Mexicali farmers. The SRH's proposal for the works issued in 1966 estimated the cost at a lofty \$999,500,000 pesos (about \$100 million U.S. dollars at the time; approximately \$690 million dollars when adjusted for inflation). The federal government would pay one quarter of this amount, with the remainder divided among the water users registered on the Distrito de Riego's Padrón de Usuarios, to be paid over 25 years at 6% interest. In total, farmers would pay \$385.16 pesos per hectare per year, on top of what they already paid for irrigation water.<sup>18</sup> For an ejidatorio irrigating the standard 18 hectares, this totaled \$6,932.88 pesos per year, a significant sum; for a colono irrigating more than 18 hectares (illicitly; the Distrito de Riego had begun to impose a penalty of \$245 pesos per

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola*, 213.

hectare for each hectare in excess of the 18 permitted by the Distrito), the amount would be even higher. Virtually all farmers in Mexicali opposed this division of the costs, delaying the plan's approval and the start of construction until 1969. The controversy created further tensions among the Valley's agrarian groups (explored below).

In addition to the Rehabilitation plans, in 1966 the SRH and SAG formed a joint scientific commission to experiment on salinity in the Mexicali Valley, with four scientists from each Secretariat. The commission's first objective was to quantify the damages caused to the Valley by the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk, in case Mexico chose to pursue a legal claim against the United States in the future. Its second objective was to determine the best agricultural practices in the Mexicali Valley. The experiments were undertaken in secret, without the knowledge of local farmers and even the knowledge of CILA and Distrito de Riego officials, out of fear that political pressures would sway the results.<sup>19</sup>

The first objective soon proved impossible. The factors affecting agricultural productivity and soil salinization were too complex for the effect of the salinity inputs from Wellton-Mohawk to be isolated. The scientists on the commission agreed that cotton harvests since 1962 would have been bigger without Wellton-Mohawk, but proving the actual amounts was not feasible.<sup>20</sup>

The second objective was more promising. The commission first determined and mapped the four main soil types in the Valley – the sandier, faster-draining Gila light phase and Gila heavy phase; the clay-based, slower-draining Imperial, and Holtville – and then classified them on a scale based on their permeability, alkalinity (i.e. mineral content), and soil profile. Then, on a number of test plots, the scientists experimented by irrigating cotton

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<sup>19</sup> *Informe: Comisión Para el Estudio de la Salinidad en el Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, B.C.*, November, 1976. Archivo Histórico del Agua, Biblioteca.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.



and wheat with different volumes of water at different concentrations of salinity. The results would determine what volume of irrigation water was most efficient, and what level of salinity was tolerable, for Mexicali's main soils and crop types. Each phase of the experiment, however, required a full agricultural cycle to complete, so determining statistically relevant results would take years. In 1968 the commission requested that its experiments continue for six more years and be expanded to other crops, like alfalfa, soy, and safflower.<sup>21</sup> The same year, the SAG initiated a program called the *Plan de Mejoramiento Parcelario* (Parcel Improvement Plan), known as PlaMePa. It entailed outreach to Valley farmers to educate them about improved agricultural techniques, such as efficient irrigation methods, land leveling, fertilization, infrastructure maintenance, and pest control.

Pest control, in fact, took on ever great importance, even as it proved ever more futile. In December 1965, empty egg cases of the dreaded pink bollworm, called the *gusano rosado* in Spanish, were found for the first time in Mexicali, believed to have been accidentally carried from Arizona.<sup>22</sup> The bollworm is the larva of an invasive species of moth (*Pectinophora gossypiella*) that lays its eggs on young cotton bolls. The larvae bore into the boll and eat their way through the fibers to feed on the cottonseeds, damaging both. They pupate inside the boll or on the ground and emerge as moths. In warm climates, the pupae stay dormant within unpicked or unopened bolls, and can re-infest the same field the following year. The pink bollworm is extremely difficult to eradicate and can cause cotton crop losses of virtually 100%. Ironically, the pink bollworm is thought to have entered the United States from Northeastern Mexico in the late 1800s. Along with the boll weevil, the

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<sup>21</sup> Comisión Para el Estudio de la Salinidad en el Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, B.C to José Hernández Terán, 29 August 1968. Archivo Histórico del Agua, Consultivo Técnico, Box 13, File 61.

<sup>22</sup> "Más brotes de gusano rosado en el Valle de Mexicali," 21 December 1965. *El Mexicano*.

two pests spread rapidly and devastated the old cotton belt in the 1920s.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the impulse to spread cotton agriculture into the arid southwest and Mexico in the first place was largely due to the destructive work of the bollworm and weevil.

To control the spread of the bollworm, the SAG put strict controls on the transport of cotton fiber and seed, but by the following October, infestations broke out in Colonia Miguel Alemán and Ejido Janitzio. Working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and cotton growers in California, the SAG approved a plan to control the worm by destroying its habitat: everything planted up to January 1 would be destroyed, with the lands flooded where possible, and no new crops would be planted until March 15.<sup>24</sup> Yet by January, a SAG official estimated that 30,000 hectares were infested; by February the president of the Asociación de Pequeños Propietarios Agrícolas estimated that 75% of the area planted in cotton was infested. The crop-destroying plan had been totally uncoordinated, he complained, while no efforts had been implemented to contain the bollworm on trucks transporting cotton.<sup>25</sup> In May of that year, the SAG implemented a \$500 million peso plan to eradicate the worm by, among other measures, spraying DDT.<sup>26</sup> Yet the supply of pesticide ran out before all farmers could make use of it. While some bought DDT on their own, others could not afford to (its use elsewhere has shown that DDT has limited capability and even with 100% application, would likely not have ended the infestation).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the boll weevil and the fear it engendered among cotton growers, see James C Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> “Medidas para evitar que se extienda la plaga de gusano rosado,” 30 October 1966. *El Mexicano*; “Sentaron las bases para la erradicación del gusano rosado,” 9 December 1966. *El Mexicano*.

<sup>25</sup> “Ya son 30 mil hectáreas las invadidas por el gusano rosado,” 21 January 1967. *El Mexicano*; “Sombrio panorama por el gusano rosado en el Valle de Mexicali,” 18 February 1967. *El Mexicano*.

<sup>26</sup> “Programa de 4 años para la erradicación del gusano rosado,” 28 April 1967. *El Mexicano*; “Aplicación de insecticidas para controlar el gusano rosado,” 28 June 1967, *El Mexicano*.

<sup>27</sup> Meade, *El valle de Mexicali*, 178.

By January 1968, the SAG declared the pink bollworm infestation a state of emergency. They called on farmers, private interests, and the government to come together to pay for and carry out control measures. In February, the Asociación Algodonera met with the SAG and agreed to an increase on the *ad valorem* tax paid on cotton exports to fund anti-pest measures.<sup>28</sup> Yet by June, at the start of the cotton season, a conservative estimate pegged the area infested by the pink bollworm at over 26,000 hectares; by August it had nearly doubled to 50,000.<sup>29</sup>

The bollworm infestations caused widespread concern and hardship in Mexicali among farmers and cotton executives alike. The cost of pesticides and the labor required to combat the worm – destroying and plowing under all plants at the end of the cotton season, then burning or flooding the ground to kill dormant pupae – put further strains on the profit margins of cotton farmers. Even worse, it coincided with a plunge in the global price of cotton, caused by the U.S. government’s decision to cease its program of buying and stockpiling unsold cotton.<sup>30</sup> Just months before the first evidence of the pink bollworm was found in Mexicali, the manager of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, James Stone, announced that the Jabonera would pay only \$280 pesos per bale of cotton fiber, a drop from the previous year’s price of \$300 pesos per bale. The reason, Stone said, was because the U.S. government had not yet declared how it would dispose of the 12 million bales in its possession.<sup>31</sup> Farmers jeered Stone’s announcement, accusing him of trying to trick farmers into accepting lower prices, but in fact worse was yet to come. With the end of

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<sup>28</sup> “50 por ciento del advalorem para combatir el gusano rosado,” 17 February 1968. *El Mexicano*.

<sup>29</sup> “26,366 hectáreas están infestadas con el gusano rosado,” 23 July 1968. *El Mexicano*; “49,593 hectáreas infestadas por la plaga del gusano rosado,” 6 August 1968. *El Mexicano*.

<sup>30</sup> Luis Aboites Aguilar, *El Norte Entre Algodones: Población, Trabajo Agrícola y Optimismo En México, 1930-1970* (El Colegio de Mexico AC, 2013), 351-352.

<sup>31</sup> DFS Memorandum, 9 June 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-965, Bundle 15, Folio 301.

the U.S. cotton program flooding the market with low-grade cotton, the global price of the fiber dropped to about 21 U.S. cents per pound, a twenty-year low, and remained there until the end of the decade. The drop in price had widespread, devastating effects on Mexicali's export-oriented, cotton-dominated economy.

By 1968, the combination of low prices for cotton, mounting debts for farmers, devastation from the bollworm, increasingly decrepit irrigation and drainage systems, greater uncertainty about groundwater supplies, repeatedly delayed infrastructure improvements, and the rather un-dramatic effects of Minute 218 had thrown the Mexicali Valley back into unrest. Unlike the dispute over Wellton-Mohawk, however, this time the sense of catastrophe did not have an easily-identified external cause, but instead derived from a number of sources. Moreover, whereas the salinity issue had spared some – such as cotton executives, industrial workers, or colonos with access to well water – the generalized malaise of the late 1960s affected Mexicalenses more or less equally. It came to a head in the summer of 1968, when state elections were scheduled. The elections had major consequences for the Central Campesina Independiente and Alfonso Garzón, whose fortunes had been ailing since the group's schism in late 1964.

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Garzón's expulsion of communist members and the signing of Minute 218 only created problems for the Central Campesina Independiente. The abrupt switch from opposing the PRI to proclaiming loyalty did not immediately win the CCI any influence in, or sympathy from, the party. Yet at the same time, it drove away members who had been attracted by the group's radicalism or who remained loyal to Arturo Orona and Ramón

Danzós Palomino. Even worse, the signing of Minute 218 temporarily ended the group's greatest rallying cause. From late 1964 until 1968, the CCI foundered, drifting in irrelevance.

Garzón's attempts to woo the PRI establishment produced mostly humiliation for the group. In April 1965, for example, Garzón claimed that the PRI president Carlos Madrazo had promised that Manuel Rodríguez Meza, a member of the LAE's executive committee, would be the PRI's nominee for *Diputado Local* for Mexicali, in exchange for the LAE's support of the PRI candidate for governor. When Garzón, Francisco Díaz Echerivel, and a delegation of LAE members turned up at the PRI municipal committee meeting in which the candidates were to be decided, however, Rodríguez Meza's candidacy had been rejected.<sup>32</sup> Local PRI officials claimed, as an excuse, that the LAE's shortlist of nominees had not been delivered on time.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the LAE endorsed the PRI's new candidate for governor, Raúl Sánchez Díaz – even after Garzón had earlier made effusive public statements of support for the previous PRI candidate – governor José Ricardi Tirado, now dropped for Sánchez Díaz.<sup>34</sup> Party loyalty did not equal party influence.

The CCI's and LAE's reversal alienated members who had formerly been drawn to the groups' radical stance. While Garzón and Díaz Echerivel met with PRI officials, a group of dissident CCI members led by Feliciano Correa, whom Garzón had ejected in September, and his wife Enriqueta García de Correa, were reportedly visiting ejidos around the Valley attempting to convince LAE members to convoke an assembly to demand an audit of the group's finances and to eject Garzón, Díaz Echerivel, Rodríguez Meza, and José María

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<sup>32</sup> DFS Memorandum, 19 April 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-65, Bundle 4, Folio 228.

<sup>33</sup> DFS Memorandum, 23 April 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-65, Bundle 5, Folio 56.

<sup>34</sup> DFS Memorandum, 23 April 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-1-965, Bundle 15, Folios 101-104.

Contreras for all of the “irregularities” they had committed.<sup>35</sup> At a CCI meeting in Michoacán in June, Garzón’s speech was interrupted by a member – drunk, according to the DFS – who shouted “Alfonso Garzón, you are a parasite [*vividor*], get down and go work with a hoe and a stick and help poor campesinos; we’re tired of the Blah Blah Blah of all the leaders of all the organizations who are always jacking off [*se la están jalando*].”<sup>36</sup> This member was promptly ejected from the meeting, and Garzón carried out on the shoulders of other attendees, but in fact many members of the CCI and LAE shared similar views.

Membership numbers of both groups declined. More radical members looked elsewhere for more robust opposition to the regime, including a small number who joined the “Red” CCI led by Orona and Danzós Palomino. Others turned to the CNC and the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias. Those groups, as official wings of the PRI, had no claim to radicalism, but they did at least have influence within the party. In July, the DFS reported that the average attendance at the LAE’s monthly meetings had dropped precipitously from about 1500 to between 60 and 80. This estimate was either a typographical error that should have read 600 to 800, based on the numbers reported at other meetings (which I consider more likely, given the low standards of accuracy of DFS memoranda), or was based off of one particularly poorly attended meeting. But the reason for the drop was unambiguous: “The membership loss of this Liga follows the joining of the group to the PRI.”<sup>37</sup> Other members were frustrated by the leaderships’ unwillingness to pay heed to Mexicali’s rural women, or by certain leaders’ apparent embezzlement of funds, or by their slow progress in solving

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<sup>35</sup> DFS Memorandum, 19 April 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-65, Bundle 4, Folio 228.

<sup>36</sup> DFS Memorandum, 22 June 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-14-3-2-65, Bundle 1, Folio 224.

<sup>37</sup> DFS Memorandum, 6 July 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 9, Folio 22.

agrarian problems.<sup>38</sup> By November, the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias reported that its membership had ballooned with the joining of disaffected LAE members, and the LAE had begun a campaign among ejidatorios to increase its membership.<sup>39</sup>

The trend worsened in 1966. In January of that year, the Liga Agraria Estatal and the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias celebrated the Asalto a las Tierras jointly for the first time, with state governor Raul Sánchez Díaz and Lauro Ortega of the PRI National Executive Committee also in attendance. Garzón, who was not scheduled to speak, did so anyway. He railed against latifundismo and declared that the CCI did not seek to fuse with other groups but wanted merely to work with “honorable and honest agrarian leaders and progressive agrarian groups, to solve the Mexican peasantry’s problems.” He ended by applauding the agrarian policy of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz – a stark change for someone who less than two years before had helped spearhead a presidential campaign against Díaz.<sup>40</sup>

Ambivalence about the LAE’s and CCI’s loyalty to the PRI became entangled with opposition to the controversial plans for the Rehabilitation Project. In January of 1966, Garzón declared that all members of the LAE affected by the Rehabilitation plan must give it their approval. Many did not. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Garzón held a group meeting at the Liga’s brand new headquarters in Mexicali to discuss the SRH’s plans. But the DFS reported that a group of LAE members held another meeting simultaneously at the *Ejido Islas Agrarias* in the Mexicali Valley, to discuss their opposition to the plans. The DRS reported that “the holding of these two meetings has been interpreted as the start of a division in the heart of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> DFS Memorandum, 13 November 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-965, Bundle 18, Folio 146.

<sup>40</sup> DFS Memorandum, 29 January 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-966, Bundle 19, Folio 152.

this Liga Agraria Estatal.”<sup>41</sup> By the end of February, the LAE had ejected José María Contreras, of the Ejido Islas Agrarias, for campaigning against the Rehabilitation plan in spite of the LAE’s official position of support. The DFS warned that the widespread confusion over the plans among ejidatorios and colonos could easily become agitation.<sup>42</sup>

Three months later, with both Garzón and Díaz Echerivel in Mexico City, a group of dissident LAE members led by Enrique García Gaxiola and Florencio Sandoval Mejía took advantage of the visit of a large group of agricultural day laborers who had come to the LAE offices looking for contract work in the United States. They held an impromptu meeting and voted to depose Díaz Echerivel. They accused him and Garzón of mismanaging group funds and of accepting bribes from cotton companies for personal gain and to pay for the Asalto a las Tierras celebration. Alarmed, CCI leaders sent a telegram to Garzón requesting he return to Mexicali to resolve the crisis.<sup>43</sup>

Unable to locate Garzón, Díaz Echerivel returned to Mexicali and agreed to a truce with the rebel faction, until Garzón arrived on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May. He convened an emergency general assembly on May 29<sup>th</sup>, with 1200 members representing all 52 ejidos of the Mexicali Valley in attendance.<sup>44</sup> Garzón said that while it was true that Díaz Echerivel and other members had received money from cotton companies, the money had been a donation for the Asalto a las Tierras celebration in the amount of 2000 pesos and was not for personal gain. If there existed apathy and unwillingness on the executive committee to fight for campesinos’ issues, he continued, this was a failing of the whole committee, not just those who had been deposed by the rebels. He said that the LAE had been created to win economic independence

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<sup>41</sup> DFS Memorandum, 4 February 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-66, Bundle 19, Folio 180.

<sup>42</sup> DFS Memorandum, 23 February 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-66, Bundle 19, Folio 214.

<sup>43</sup> DFS Memorandum, 20 May 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3/2-66, Bundle 1, Folios 130-134.

<sup>44</sup> DFS Memorandum, 31 May 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3/2-66, Bundle 1, Folio 149.



for farmers, and not for the kind of politicking that might harm the group. The dissidents then spoke and said that while they would respect the majority decision of the group, they would not renounce their position either. They offered to resign. Díaz Echerivel then spoke in his own defense. In a vote, the membership decided by two thirds that Díaz and others should remain in their positions on the Executive Committee. They did not discuss the dissidents' offer to resign. While the conflict appeared to have been resolved, the stakes remained high: before the meeting Humberto Serrano warned Braulio Maldonado that if Garzón did not accept the group's decision on Díaz, there was a danger that he (Garzón) too could be expelled from the group.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, the DFS records on these conflicts are spotty, and focus more on the disputes themselves than on their broader context. Yet the timing raises the possibility that these tensions were related to the planned Rehabilitation project. Over the summer of 1966, widespread resistance broke out to the SRH's payment plan for the project, which would cost farmers \$385.16 per hectare per year. The LAE's endorsement of the plan and the payment schedule contributed to the intra-group tensions, particularly because the drop in cotton prices and rapid spread of the bollworm had drastically worsened many farmers' economic conditions. In July, the LAE reported that about 50% of its ejidatario members had debts that they would not be able to pay under the current conditions.<sup>46</sup> Colonos, however, opposed the Rehabilitation plans even more vociferously. Since many irrigated far more than 18 hectares, the cost of the works was even more onerous. The Unión Agrícola Regional, a colono-oriented agrarian group, spearheaded opposition plans, and by August the SRH had agreed to change the financing scheme. The federal government would now pay for 50% of the billion-

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<sup>45</sup> DFS Memorandum, 1 June 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-66, Bundle 13, Folio 304.

<sup>46</sup> DFS Memorandum, 28 July 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-66, Bundle 20, Folio 150.

peso cost, with farmers contributing the other half by paying \$192 pesos per hectare per year over 25 years.<sup>47</sup> To sweeten the deal, the SRH agreed to hire local farmers to work on the construction projects, or to pay them to undertake works on their plots. (SRH engineer Óscar Sánchez later said that most of the farmers' contributions were never in fact paid.)<sup>48</sup>

In the midst of these controversies, Alfonso Garzón began a campaign to have himself appointed to a political position by the PRI. In January 1967 he approached Amador Hernández, the chief of the PRI commission for Baja California, to request consideration for the candidacy for Diputado Federal for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Electoral District of Mexicali.<sup>49</sup> His request went unanswered, and soon Garzón was complaining to PRI leaders in Mexico City that he was being ignored. In the course of these meetings, Garzón perhaps pushed the issue too far, warning Lauro Ortega that the “half million members” of the CCI “are not satisfied with the attitude of the CNC and so care must be taken that they don’t join another party and that this had him between a rock and a hard place [*entre la espada y la pared*, literally between the sword and the wall]”.<sup>50</sup> But Garzón’s entreaties and threats went unanswered.

Opposition to the Rehabilitation project continued. In June 1967, for example, the Executive Committee of the CCI expelled eighteen farmers from the group because they had been “causing confusion” and “provoking inconformity” against the planned works among ejidatorios.<sup>51</sup> Opposition to the Rehabilitation was joined by widespread anger to a Distrito de Riego proposal to reduce farmers’ irrigation rights from eighteen hectares to fourteen, a reduction it claimed necessary to meet the shortfall of water caused by the region’s decrepit

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<sup>47</sup> DFS Memorandum, 16 August 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-66, Bundle 20, Folio 206.

<sup>48</sup> Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola*, 226.

<sup>49</sup> DFS report, 18 January 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 16, Folio 1.

<sup>50</sup> DFS report, 6 April 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 17, Folio 245.

<sup>51</sup> DFS Memorandum, 16 June 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-67, Bundle 21, Folio 289.

and inefficient irrigation infrastructure. The UAR strongly opposed the measure, and a group of disaffected LCA and LAE members mobilized against it. Led by José María Contreras, who the DFS described as “characterized by his marked leftist ideology”, the group numbered more than 150 people, representing fourteen ejidos and seven colonias.<sup>52</sup>

The disconnect between the leadership of the LAE, which favored the SRH’s and Distrito’s plans, and the membership, which opposed it, threatened to pull the group apart. The rifts surfaced at a meeting in early September to elect a new Executive Committee. The two main contenders for Secretary General were Roberto Olivas Córdoba and Enrique García Gaxiola, who had the previous year had led the movement to depose Francisco Díaz Echerivel. García’s supporters, numbering some 200, complained when it was announced that to vote, each member would need to show his or her membership card; many of them had not been issued membership cards yet. When Garzón attempted to open the voting anyway, they shouted him down. After a 30-minute standoff, Garzón agreed to change the procedure, but García’s supporters refused to participate and gathered in the street, where they were joined by Juan Rodríguez Meza and Humberto Serrano Pérez, both former close associates of Garzón.<sup>53</sup> Tensions rose as one member exhorted the rest, now numbering close to 300, to storm the building. García Gaxiola convinced them not to, and the group dispersed, but not before others uttered death threats against Garzón.<sup>54</sup> The remaining members elected Olivas Córdoba the Secretary General. A week later, the group of dissidents led by

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<sup>52</sup> DFS Memorandum, 8 March 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-67, Bundle 1, Folio 176.

<sup>53</sup> It is not clear if the events are related, but at the end of September Humberto Serrano Pérez was detained – kidnapped, in his words – by police in the State of Mexico. Serrano was grabbed in the town of Jilotepec, and taken to Tepejé del Río, where the local police had given him both twenty pesos to make his way back to the capital and a promise to kill him if he ever returned or complained to the authorities. Such arbitrary arrests were not uncommon in the rural areas where the CCI operated. DFS Memorandum, 3 October 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 18, Folio 84.

<sup>54</sup> DFS Memorandum, 11 September 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-67, Bundle 1, Folio 174.

Rodríguez Meza and García Gaxiola had renounced their membership in the LAE and joined the CNC-affiliated Liga de Comunidades Agrarias. DFS agents noted the “L.A.E. is starting to weaken, as these two members have much influence [*arraigo*] and will start to draw people to the L.C.A.”<sup>55</sup>

All the while, Garzón’s efforts to gain political posts for the CCI amounted to little. A campaign to have the PRI put CCI members on the ballot in Guadalajara saw Garzón shunted uselessly from one bureaucrat to another, each offering some excuse without actually voicing opposition to the idea of registering CCI candidates.<sup>56</sup> Finally, in early March 1968, the President of the PRI, Alfonso Martínez Domínguez, informed Garzón that two CCI candidates would be nominated in Mexicali: Roberto Olivas Córdoba for *Diputado Local*, and Salvador Solorio Aguilar for *Regidor*. But the nominations came only after Garzón promised to travel to Mexicali and organize CCI and LAE members to come out in support of the PRI and against the PAN.<sup>57</sup> He agreed with gusto, and in Mexicali gave speeches attacking the PAN for being “*sombrerudos* [hat-wearers] disguised as campesinos” who would take away “all the benefits that the country’s campesinos enjoy [and that] emanate from the Revolution, which is represented by our party the P.R.I.”<sup>58</sup>

The PRI’s enlistment of its one-time opponent Garzón to campaign reveals just how strong of a campaign the PAN had been running in Baja California. The party, which had long counted the state as a stronghold, had taken advantage of the unrest caused by the crash in cotton prices, the pink bollworm infestations, and the controversial Rehabilitation plan, to attack the PRI. Meanwhile, disgust with the PRI’s methods of appointing candidates and

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<sup>55</sup> DFS Memorandum, 22 September 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-67, Bundle 22, Folio 243.

<sup>56</sup> DFS Memorandum, 14 November 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 18, Folio 215.

<sup>57</sup> DFS Memorandum, 15 March 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-68, Bundle 19, Folio 196.

<sup>58</sup> DFS Memorandum, 10 June 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-68, Bundle 7, Folio 418.

mistrust of those candidates' legitimacy had grown.<sup>59</sup> The elections, held June 12<sup>th</sup>, ended in fiasco. While the PRI candidates carried the vote in Tecate and Ensenada, the PAN easily won in Tijuana and Mexicali, winning the latter city by 12,000 votes.<sup>60</sup> The next day, the PRI announced that the *Comisión Electoral Estatal* [State Electoral Commission] had declared the results for Tijuana and Mexicali invalid and the elections annulled (it duly recognized the results for Tecate and Ensenada, unsurprisingly). The electoral commission stated that the PAN had been inciting citizens to acts of violence, had pressured voters at the polls, had defamed PRI candidates and officials, and had committed electoral frauds such as the theft of ballot boxes. As an added measure, the PRI-controlled state congress released documents that purportedly showed that the PAN candidate for Mexicali, Norberto Corella Gil Samaniego, was not born in Mexico and thus not able to run for office.<sup>61</sup>

Dubious as the nullification may have seemed, Mexican electoral law required new elections to be called for the cities in question. Instead, the Baja California state congress quickly changed the state constitution to dismantle the requirement. Instead, they announced that unelected "Municipal Councils" would be appointed to govern Tijuana and Mexicali.<sup>62</sup> Massive protests greeted the announcement, which were put down by the police and the army; as a concession the PRI stated that the councils would rule for two years instead of the usual three. The PAN protested by publicly refusing to recognize the councils. Widespread

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<sup>59</sup> Ricardo Eguía Valderrama, "El Desarrollo Del Espacio Político En Baja California: Hacia Una Modernización," in *Baja California Hacia El Año 2000*, ed. Adalberto Aceves Monteón and Ramón de Jesús Ramírez (Mexicali, B.C., México: Liga de Economistas Revolucionarios, 1990), 147.

<sup>60</sup> José Negrete Mata, "Historia Política y Alternancia En Baja California, 1952-1968," in *Baja California: Escenarios Para El Nuevo Milenio*, ed. Tonatiuh Guillén López and José Negrete Mata (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, 2002), 64-65.

<sup>61</sup> "Fueron nulificadas las elecciones para los ayuntamientos de Tijuana y Mexicali, por el Congreso Local," 14 June 1968. *El Nacional*.

<sup>62</sup> "Aprobó el Congreso del Estado las reformas constitucionales," 26 June 1968. *El Mexicano*.

disgust lingered. Yet the fact that the PRI appointed municipal councils, instead of its desired candidates, reflected a certain public admission that a fraud had been committed, and a recognition that the party could no longer openly manipulate the political system at will. As one historian has said, the 1968 elections mark the end of a period of open political frauds in Baja California and the beginning of the end of the culture of political imposition.<sup>63</sup>

If the imposition of municipal councils represented a defeat for democracy, it counted as a victory for the Central Campesina Independiente. The Secretary General of the Liga Agraria Estatal, Roberto Olivas Córdova, had been nominated a candidate for Mexicali's Fifth District by the PRI. After the nullification, the CCI and LAE pushed to have Olivas's candidacy confirmed, promising to support the PRI's municipal councils if Olivas was appointed.<sup>64</sup> Their efforts were rewarded: when the rosters of the municipal councils were announced, Olivas Córdova had been named Diputado Local for Mexicali. For the first time in its history, a member of the CCI had achieved a position in government. A dubious, bitterly ironic achievement, to be sure, considering it came via electoral fraud by the very party the group had been founded to oppose, but a momentous event and a turning point in the longer history of the salinity dispute. From 1968, the CCI would not only remain within the ranks of the PRI, but would become essential to the party's efforts to restore its loyalty and legitimacy in Baja California (events taken up in the next chapter).

Garzón now dedicated himself to campaigning in favor of the municipal councils and against the PAN. Behind the scenes, he petitioned energetically for LAE member Salvador Solorio Aguilar to be appointed to the council as well, though to no avail. He made considerable efforts to encourage CCI and LAE members to support the PRI government.

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<sup>63</sup> Negrete Mata, "Historia Política y Alternancia En Baja California, 1952-1968," 65.

<sup>64</sup> DFS Memorandum, 25 June 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-18-68, Bundle 9, Folio 46.

September was usually a time of tension over the price of cotton in which the LAE had mounted some of its boldest demonstrations, including roadblocks and strikes to force buyers to pay a higher price for cotton. That September, however, Garzón told the LAE that the group “will not promote any agitation movement that could complicate further the economic crisis that is sweeping the region.”<sup>65</sup> More startlingly, as student protests rocked Mexico City, the CCI’s only response was to issue a press release clarifying that a group of demonstrators who had carried banners bearing the CCI’s initials did not belong to the group or represent its views.<sup>66</sup> The CCI reacted to the October 2<sup>nd</sup> massacre of students in Tlatelolco only with the following telegram to Díaz Ordaz, also released to the press: “trust the loyalty that the members of this Central have demonstrated and that for no reason will they allow any one of those members to betray the trust you have shown us.”<sup>67</sup> A group that only four years before had launched an electoral challenge to unseat the PRI now reacted to the most egregious and public state violence in recent memory with a public vow of support.

Unsurprisingly, the CCI’s support continued when the man largely responsible for the violence, Secretario de Gobernación Luis Echeverría, was named the PRI’s presidential candidate the following year. In July, Garzón flew to Mexicali to restore order in the Liga Agraria Estatal, after Francisco Díaz Echerivel had publicly criticized not only the PAN but also the PRI, “which he says does little or nothing to solve the problems” of farmers, according to the DFS.<sup>68</sup> Díaz and LAE Secretary General and Diputado Local Roberto Olivas Córdoba had been squabbling for months, and the latter took the attacks personally.

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<sup>65</sup> DFS Memorandum, 30 September 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-2-68, Bundle 1, Folio 197.

<sup>66</sup> DFS Memorandum, 18 September 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-68, Bundle 19, Folio 407.

<sup>67</sup> DFS Memorandum, 10 October 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-68, Bundle 19, Folio 421.

<sup>68</sup> DFS Memorandum, 29 July 1969. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-2-969, Bundle 1, Folio 235.

Garzón's presence helped to isolate Díaz, restore Olivas's authority, and reaffirm the group's support for the PRI.

In September, Garzón declared that all CCI members would vote for the PRI's candidate, and warned the group's members to stay vigilant against the PAN, "since everything the campesino has, is not owed to dandies [*catrinas*], it's owed to the government."<sup>69</sup> Such vocal support paid off: in late December, candidate Echeverría kicked off a tour of the Mexicali Valley at a LAE rally in the Mexicali Valley, where Garzón and the group's members promised their support to the candidate.<sup>70</sup> The seed planted with the expulsion of PCM members in 1964 had come to fruition.

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Garzón's change of faith may inspire cynicism, as it surely did among members of the LAE and CCI. Yet it is too simplistic to dismiss his actions as the calculated moves of a political aspirant, determined to gain power by any means necessary. Garzón did, of course, display no shortage of political ambition, ideological flexibility, and willingness to compromise – few willing to enter the rough and tumble of Mexican agrarian politics in the 1960s would not. Yet his return to the fold of the ruling party also reflects a sense of pragmatism and the realities of political participation under the PRI system. In his account of the Mexican Revolution, Alan Knight describes the seemingly paradoxical "logic" of the Revolution, in which local groups switched sides repeatedly between various factions, and objectives produced their opposites. Rather than reflecting mere chaos, he writes, the logic of the Revolution lay in the locally-rooted, multifaceted nature of the conflict, which was never

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<sup>69</sup> DFS Memorandum, 8 September 1969. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-3-2-69, Bundle 1, Folio 239.

<sup>70</sup> DFS Memorandum, 22 December 1969. AGN, Galería 1, File 10-26-969, Bundle 15, Folio 289.



a national phenomenon but a pluralistic one that played out differently in its myriad local contexts.<sup>71</sup>

The case of Garzón suggests that the logic of the Revolution applies to the PRI state of the 1960s as well. Under a single-party regime willing to use blatant fraud and violence against challenges from without, but somewhat flexible to change from within, ideological purity amounted to little. Pragmatism, flexibility (or perhaps slipperiness), cunning, and a degree of ruthlessness could achieve much more. If it seems easy to criticize Garzón, it bears remembering that he had been threatened with death, jailed, pursued and watched by the secret police, and subject to numerous forms of intimidation in the years before the CCI schism.

Instructive in this case are the fortunes of the expelled members, the so-called CCI-Roja, after 1964. To summarize, things went from bad to much worse for the CCI-Roja. In the face of relentless surveillance, intimidation, violence, and the threat of arrest, the group lost virtually all of its former supporters and its income. Barely able to pay bills, the CCI-Roja could no longer take meaningful action, which furthered the drain of supporters who went looking for less ideologically principled but more practically effective groups. The speed at which the group lost relevance is astonishing.

The group held an “inaugural” congress in early January 1965, at the same time that the CCI-Garzón met. 750 people attended. They heard the usual praise for Cuba and criticisms of government corruption, coupled with denunciations of Garzón and Humberto Serrano. In a foreshadowing of troubles to come, they also asked attendees to donate any

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<sup>71</sup> Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

money they could, since the cost of holding the congress had been \$4,500 pesos but the group had only collected \$566 pesos so far.<sup>72</sup>

Police repression and infighting diminished the group's capabilities dramatically. Heavy-handed police brutality became the norm. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1965, for example, twenty DFS agents swarmed the CCI-Roja headquarters. The agents ransacked the offices, seized reams of documents, and arrested thirteen people. They left policemen to guard the facility and deny entry to group members.<sup>73</sup> In August of that year, the group attempted to launch a campaign to have member Julio Prado Valdez elected governor of Baja California. It failed horribly. Prado, barely able to appear in public let alone campaign for fear of being arrested, was left off the ballot, and the CCI-Roja decried the whole election a fraud.<sup>74</sup> More and more, the CCI-Roja dedicated its time to attacking Alfonso Garzón and other leftist groups, instead of pursuing political and social reforms or criticizing the PRI. Garzón, in return, waged a multi-year legal battle to stop the Orona-Danzós group from using the name Central Campesina Independiente, to no avail.<sup>75</sup>

The situation worsened the following year. In February, leaders complained that the group was three months behind in the rent for its offices and that its electricity had been cut for failure to pay. Leaders could no longer afford travel to visit affiliate groups or to seek new members.<sup>76</sup> A number of planned protests had to be cancelled, because of police presence. In August, the police arrested 27 members of the group for allegedly plotting

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<sup>72</sup> DFS Memorandum, 8 January 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 7, Folio 222.

<sup>73</sup> DFS Memorandum, 13 April 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-4-65, Bundle 13, Folio 223.

<sup>74</sup> DFS Memorandum, 2 August 1965. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-65, Bundle 9, Folios 229-236.

<sup>75</sup> Among the hundreds of DFS reports on the CCI-Roja, one stood out as a quirky example of only-in-Mexico "communist agitation": in January 1966, the police reported that the CCI-Roja had been stuffing political flyers in mailboxes; the flyers exhorted people to pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe to protect Cuba from Yankee imperialism. In Mexico, it seems, even socialist revolution sought God for its side. DFS Memorandum, 27 January 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-66, Bundle 12, Folio 99.

<sup>76</sup> DFS Memorandum, 9 February 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-66, Bundle 12, Folio 141.

against the government. Juan Ramírez protested that the detainees had been tortured in detention and had been forced to confess to crimes they did not commit. The leaders of the CCI-Roja escaped into hiding, and the group's headquarters went unstaffed.<sup>77</sup> In September the CCI-Roja officially declared its separation from the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, accusing the latter of abandoning its promise, but the separation was mostly symbolic: the MLN, too, had been largely ineffective since 1964.<sup>78</sup>

The axe fell on Ramon Danzós Palomino the following year. In early May 1967, the DFS reported that he was in Havana, participating in an effort to spread guerrilla warfare throughout Latin America via Mexico.<sup>79</sup> Mexican police arrested Danzós when he returned to Mexico on May 18<sup>th</sup>. Only on May 31<sup>st</sup> did the other members of the CCI-Roja learn of his whereabouts. He had been taken to the infamous Campo Militar #1, a detention center notorious for torture, and then transferred by plane to a prison in Sonora.<sup>80</sup>

Danzós languished in prison, without charge, for months. The CCI-Roja attempted to organize protests outside the jail to demand his release, but DFS agents and riot police broke up the protests.<sup>81</sup> In mid-July the CCI-Roja complained to authorities that Danzós had contracted pneumonia in prison and was being denied medical care.<sup>82</sup> Charges were brought against him in August, but he did not appear in court until December. The court acquitted him of charges of sedition, conspiracy, rioting, conspiracy to purchase illegal weapons,

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<sup>77</sup> DFS Memorandum, 17 August 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-66, Bundle 14, Folio 114.

<sup>78</sup> DFS Memorandum, 7 September 1966. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-66, Bundle 14, Folio 186.

<sup>79</sup> DFS Memorandum, 5 May 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 16, Folio 353.

<sup>80</sup> DFS Memorandum, 31 May 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 45-1-967, Bundle 10, Folio 211.

<sup>81</sup> DFS Memorandum, 6 June 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 17, Folio 24.

<sup>82</sup> DFS Memorandum, 13 July 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-67, Bundle 17, Folio 168.

provocation to commit a crime, assault, homicide, damages, arson, and conspiracy against public officials.<sup>83</sup> Danzós was freed, almost seven months after his arrest.

Soon after, however, the DFS reported that a new order for his arrest had been issued for other charges. Danzós went into hiding. The group barely held together: a national congress in early 1968 only drew 35 members.<sup>84</sup> The CCI-Roja lent its support to the 1968 students' movement, but DFS reports on the group were by that point few and far between, and do not tell to what extent the CCI was involved. By March 1969, the CCI-Roja's beleaguered executive committee wrote to the Partido Comunista Mexicano that the group "was in a critical situation" and asked for help "in every way." Before the PCM could help (if it indeed it would), Danzós was arrested again. The DFS stopped filing reports on the group later that year.<sup>85</sup>

The plight of the CCI-Roja after 1965 should halt the impulse to dismiss Garzón and the CCI as *charros* – sell-outs. Without delving too deeply into exegeses of Gramscian hegemony,<sup>86</sup> it is clear that PRI repression worked so effectively because it offered political actors a simple choice: work within the party, and achieve some objectives (albeit watered-down ones); work against the party, and achieve nothing. Political actors self-censored and self-repressed, because only by doing so could they hope for influence. As Evan Ward wrote, using a common phrase in the historiography of the PRI, Garzón and the CCI were "co-opted".<sup>87</sup> Yet it is an exaggeration to conclude, as Ward does, that such co-optation meant their influence declined. As the next chapter will show, the expiry of Minute 218 and the

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<sup>83</sup> DFS Memorandum, 7 December 1967. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-24-1-67, Bundle 7, Folio 161

<sup>84</sup> DFS Memorandum, 22 March 1968. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-1-83-68, Bundle 1, Folio 28.

<sup>85</sup> DFS Memorandum, 16 April 1969. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-183-69, Bundle 1, Folio 233.

<sup>86</sup> For an overview of the many works on Mexico that do, see G. M Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> Ward, *Border Oasis*, 85.

Díaz Ordaz sexenio created an opportunity for the CCI to wield its influence on the party from below.

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As Mexicalenses struggled against the pink bollworm, the collapse of cotton prices, the decrepitude of water infrastructure, and the cynical results of the 1968 elections, the impending expiry of Minute 218 once again brought the issue of salinity to the fore. Mexico had a choice: renew the existing agreement, modify it, or scrap it entirely and negotiate a new one. Mexicalense public opinion firmly endorsed the latter option. The Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali, which had been inactive since 1966, reconvened in January 1969 to call for a new agreement.<sup>88</sup> The Unión Agrícola Regional and the Central Campesina Independiente agreed. As Alfonso Garzón wrote to Antonio Carrillo Flores, “We beg... for your intervention in the problem [and] to make effective the International Waters Treaty so that the delivery of waters contaminated with salts no longer continues as is currently happening in the Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado.”<sup>89</sup> The CCI, he said, had voted in its Sixth Agrarian Plenary Session to oppose the renewal of the Minute. Mexicalenses shared a strong, if unspecific dissatisfaction with Minute 218. Few defended the agreement, even though their complaints were often stated in generalized terms: that the Minute reduced Mexico’s water supply, for example, or that it poisoned Mexico’s water and fields with salt, or that it represented U.S. imperialism (see cartoon below).

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<sup>88</sup> “Sigue la Salinidad en el Valle de Mexicali”, *El Heraldo*, 3 January 1969.

<sup>89</sup> “Más Salinidad Para Mexicali”, *La Prensa*, 22 March 1969; Alfonso Garzón to Antonio Carrillo Flores, 15 July 1969. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-4, Folio 278.



*“Hey! You’re even salting my soup...” Note the double meaning of *salar* in this context, which translates both as “to salt” or “to make salty” but also as “to ruin,” and “to jinx.” The irate diner bears a strong resemblance to Alfonso Garzón. Source: Excelsior, 9 August 1969.*

More specific complaints came from the Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali, which wrote a long letter to David Herrera Jordán in July. The Comité had met to discuss Minute 218, and had reached the conclusion that the agreement should be scrapped and replaced. The agreement had forced Mexicali to waste millions of cubic meters of water per year, at a cost to Mexicali, they claimed, of \$50 million pesos. Moreover, they claimed the agreement had not reduced the salinity of Mexicali’s water. In sum, they wrote, Minute 218 “has not given the desired results.... the Comité continues to insist that Mexico receive water of equal quality to the ultimate users in the United States... [and] if necessary, our country should go to the International Court of Justice” to resolve the issue.<sup>90</sup> Yet even the Comité’s more articulate rejection of Minute 218 rested on the apparent unfairness of the agreement – that Mexico should have to waste some of its annual allotment while still receiving water of

<sup>90</sup> Comité de Defensa to Carrillo, 26 July 1969. SRE, CILA, File C-140-4, Folios 280-283.

poorer quality than its neighbor. Its empirical claims about the agreement's effect on Mexicali agriculture were more tenuous.

The scientists of the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas and the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos had a different viewpoint. Their technical perspective revealed a more complex picture of Mexicali agriculture, in which the salinity input from Wellton-Mohawk was only one factor shaping Mexicali's complex agro-environmental landscape. Based on their observations, Minute 218 had worked for the most part satisfactorily: it had kept salinity to a safe level, averaging just below 1300 ppm except for a few brief spikes. It had required wasting water, true, but the amount – 3-3.5% of Mexico's annual allotment – paled in comparison with the 40-50% lost to evaporation, transpiration and infiltration in Mexicali's aging and inefficient system of canals and drainage ditches. The CILA, moreover, had firsthand experience of how tricky and intractable bi-national negotiations on the Colorado could be.

The unofficial spokesman – or perhaps sacrificial lamb – for the defense of Minute 218 was CILA commissioner David Herrera Jordán. He wrote a lengthy response to the Comité de Defensa, with point-by-point rebuttals to their claims about Minute 218's shortcomings, and compiled statistics that showed the reduction of the salinity of water delivered to Mexico.<sup>91</sup> His files contain heavily annotated newspaper clippings about Minute 218, with corrections and comments in the margins (e.g. "Exaggerated!").<sup>92</sup> Herrera castigated the Distrito de Riego, not for the first time, for its poor management of water that had led to spikes in salinity, bringing Minute 218 a bad name.<sup>93</sup> He also defended Minute

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<sup>91</sup> Herrera Jordán to SRE, 19 August 1969. SRE, CILA, File C-141-1, Folios 11-13.

<sup>92</sup> Files of David Herrera Jordán, September 1969. SRE, CILA, File C-141-1, Folio 38.

<sup>93</sup> Herrera Jordán to Muñoz Ramírez, 19 January 1970. SRE, CILA, File C-141, Folio 108.

218 in the press, telling *Novedades* that “there is no reason to create a problem when things are going as well as they can, in an issue as full of pitfalls [*recovecos*] as the international-level claims about Mexico’s rights to those waters that once were ours.”<sup>94</sup>

While technicians like Herrera saw the agreement working reasonably well within a broader set of complex problems, everyday Mexicalenses suffered the problems – and blamed the agreement. The salinity problem and Minute 218 had come to represent all of the frustrations of cotton agriculture over the past couple of years: the drop in prices, the rising debts, the soaring costs of pest control amidst the devastation caused by the pink bollworm. These differing viewpoints came to a head in December 1969 at a public meeting of the Comité de Defensa, the Valley’s agrarian groups, and representatives of the CILA. Also in attendance was the PRI’s presidential candidate, the Secretario de Gobernación Luis Echeverría Álvarez, who had been named by Díaz Ordaz on November 8<sup>th</sup>. This was not Echeverría’s first encounter with Mexicali or the volatility of its water politics – or with Alfonso Garzón. As Subsecretario de Gobernación under López Mateos, Echeverría had brokered a solution to the cotton price strike of September 1962, and then had traveled to Mexicali in early 1963 to mediate a solution to the water price strike. Both demonstrations, of course, had been spearheaded by Alfonso Garzón. (Another, more distant connection: Echeverría had earlier worked as the personal secretary to the president of the PRI, Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada, who had been the governor of the Territory of Baja California from 1937 to 1944). What happened that evening could only have strengthened Echeverría’s understanding of the central place of water in Mexicali and the symbolic potency of the salinity issue to the region’s politics.

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<sup>94</sup> “La CILA no ha desatenido el Caso Salino,” *La Voz de la Frontera*, 29 June 1969; “La salinidad vuelve a ser tema del día,” *Novedades*, 8 July 1969.



Representatives of the Liga Agraria Estatal, Liga de Comunidades Agrarias, and Unión Agrícola Regional began the meeting, calling “aggressively” for Minute 218 to be scrapped and for Mexico to pursue a new agreement under the auspices of the International Court. They wanted the canal from Wellton-Mohawk be lined with concrete (as many believed the water in the canal was infiltrating the ground and salinizing Mexicali’s groundwater) and extended all the way to the Sea of Cortés. Finally, they demanded that the water from Wellton-Mohawk no longer count towards Mexico’s annual treaty amount.<sup>95</sup> Herrera Jordán took the podium next, calling for calm, courtesy and analysis, and made the case that the international problem – the decision about Minute 218’s renewal or replacement – be separated from the internal problems – the dire situation of Mexicali’s infrastructure. While the CILA, he said, could not solve the legal aspects of the problem, it could manage the technical aspects, which he claimed it had been doing fairly well so far. The salinity problem, he said, had been exaggerated.<sup>96</sup>

Herrera Jordán must have known that his words would be controversial, as he had been warned to leave the meeting immediately after speaking for his safety by Echeverría and the meeting organizers. No sooner had he done so than the meeting’s attendees began to vocally attack him and the CILA as a whole. A speaker from the CNC criticized the United States for causing the problem, “but also made a strong criticism of the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos and the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas for not having taken the necessary measures to solve the problem.”<sup>97</sup> Alfonso Garzón jumped into the “stormy debate” and claimed that Herrera Jordán’s data on the effects of salt on agricultural

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<sup>95</sup> Memorandum, 19 January 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-1, Folio 71.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “Recursos Hidráulicos Nada ha Hecho Contra la Salinidad”, *El Herald*, 27 December 1969.

productivity were incorrect because they did not differentiate between areas irrigated with higher quality well water and areas irrigated with lower quality river water.<sup>98</sup> An internal SRH memo reported that the speakers made personal attacks on Herrera but said “practically nothing about the analysis of the problem.”<sup>99</sup> As the local newspaper *Sol del Valle* put it, Herrera was a traitor who “came and fled like Judas” and was “giving the *patria* away to foreigners.”<sup>100</sup> What Echeverría thought of the events is impossible to know, but his later actions suggest the evening’s demonstration of the volatility of water politics made a strong impression on him.

In a more subdued tone, the Comité de Defensa wrote to Antonio Carrillo Flores that Herrera Jordán was wrong and restating their demand for a new agreement.<sup>101</sup> In response, Herrera Jordán wrote to Carrillo himself. He explained that, until the scientific experiments on salinity and irrigation in Mexicali had been completed in 1974 (see Chapter Five), it was scientifically impossible to know if Minute 218 had had a negative effect on Mexicali’s agriculture and aquifer, but to date, there was no evidence to indicate that it had. He finished the letter stating, “What decision the Government of Mexico may take regarding the recommendation of the Comité de Defensa does not correspond to the undersigned.”<sup>102</sup> The experience clearly burned Herrera: later that year he asked Carrillo Flores to excuse him from any future water negotiations, explaining that the personal anger directed towards him could predispose Mexicalenses against a new agreement, no matter how beneficial it might be.

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<sup>98</sup> “Controversía de Campesinos y Técnicos Sobre el Caso Salino”, *La Voz de la Frontera*, 27 December 1969.

<sup>99</sup> Memorandum, 19 January 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-1, Folio 71.

<sup>100</sup> “Vino y Huyó Como Judas,” *Sol del Valle*, 8 January 1970.

<sup>101</sup> Comité de Defensa to Carrillo Flores, 27 January 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-1, Folios 120-127.

<sup>102</sup> Herrera Jordán to Carrillo Flores, 10 February 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-1, Folios 118-119.

Carrillo Flores denied the request, but Herrera Jordán ceased his efforts to publicly defend Minute 218.<sup>103</sup>

While few in Mexicali commented upon it, conditions for a new agreement had in fact improved in 1968 when President Johnson signed the Colorado River Basin Project Act. The law updated Colorado River basin planning to reflect the Supreme Court's 1963 decision in the *Arizona v. California* suit; it authorized the Central Arizona Project and a slew of other infrastructure. Additionally, the law stated "that the satisfaction of the requirements of the Mexican Water Treaty from the Colorado River constitutes a national obligation which shall be the first obligation of any water augmentation project" planned in the act.<sup>104</sup>

Augmentation in this context means increasing the volume of a river by diverting water from another river basin. The Bureau of Reclamation had long called for augmentation of the Colorado (plans to do so were eventually shelved for being enormously expensive and environmentally catastrophic). Analysts of western water politics have pointed to this clause as evidence of the Bureau's hold on the federal government.<sup>105</sup> In fact, it served the opposite purpose. The wording had been added because of the deadlock between the Departments of State and the Interior in the dispute with Mexico over salinity. The State Department had had an obligation to Mexico, but no jurisdiction over water users, who had blocked efforts to resolve the issue. The act thus affirmed that supplying Mexico's water was a foreign policy imperative that took precedence over individual state claims to river water under the 1922

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<sup>103</sup> Herrera Jordán to Carrillo Flores, 20 July 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-2, Folios 65-66.

<sup>104</sup> Public Law 90-537, the Colorado River Basin Project, 30 September 1968. Viewable online: <<http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g1000/pdfiles/crbproj.pdf>>.

<sup>105</sup> Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986); Norris Hundley Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Norris Hundley et al., *Water and the West: The Colorado River Compact and the Politics of Water in the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

Colorado River Compact. The legislation restored diplomatic powers to the Department of State that had been de facto the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation, with disastrous results. But it also gave Mexico a more favorable bargaining position for a new agreement, and encouraged Mexican diplomats.<sup>106</sup>

President Díaz Ordaz, with only a few months left in his administration, waffled on the decision. In all likelihood, Díaz Ordaz's attention was elsewhere: he had an eye surgery early in 1969 that left him blind in one eye for months; his wife had problems with mental illness and his son a worsening drug addiction.<sup>107</sup> In a meeting with Luis Cabrera, the Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos, Díaz said he would likely defer the decision to Echeverría.<sup>108</sup> A few last minute options did not persuade him otherwise. In July, the IBWC proposed a new agreement to replace 218, which would substitute 50,000 acre-feet of water from Wellton-Mohawk with water from the controversial Yuma Mesa wells that had been planned (but never put into operation) since 1966. It claimed that Mexicali would get water of almost the same quality as the Imperial Valley's.<sup>109</sup> The SRH endorsed the proposal, but Díaz Ordaz dismissed it. In September, one hundred colonias and ejidos in the Mexicali Valley wrote to Díaz Ordaz, asking that Minute 218 be replaced with a new agreement that would guarantee Mexico water of similar quality to the Imperial valley's, and that the Wellton-Mohawk canal be extended to the Sea of Cortés and lined with concrete.<sup>110</sup> Díaz Ordaz instead instructed the CILA to request a three-month extension (later lengthened to

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<sup>106</sup> SRE to U.S. Embassy in Mexico, 14 January 1969. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-140-4, Folio 204.

<sup>107</sup> Jorge G Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power: How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen* (New York: New Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>108</sup> Memorandum of Meeting Between Luis Cabrera and Díaz Ordaz, 3 April 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-1, Folio 168.

<sup>109</sup> Informal Proposal in Principle for a New 5-Year Agreement With Mexico Concerning the Colorado River Salinity Problem," 10 July 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-2, Folios 47-50.

<sup>110</sup> Various letters to Díaz Ordaz, 14-17 September 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-2, Folios 143-203.

one year) of Minute 218, which the IBWC accepted.<sup>111</sup> The fate of Minute 218 – and perhaps the Mexicali Valley – would belong to Luis Echeverría.

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<sup>111</sup> Memorandum of Meeting: Dirección General de Límites y Aguas and Díaz Ordaz. 14 November 1970. SRE, Fondo CILA, File 1-141-3, Folio 16.

**Chapter Six**  
**“The Destiny of all Problems is to be Solved:” Luis Echeverría, the CCI,**  
**and the End of the Salinity Problem**

The spiraling decline of Mexicali agriculture mirrored the broader problems facing the Mexican government at the beginning of the 1970s. Stagnating social mobility and the violent repression employed by the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz administration, most notably the massacre of protesting students in Tlatelolco in 1968, brought public trust in the PRI regime, and its new president Luis Echeverría Álvarez, to new lows. Unlike Díaz, Echeverría embraced the salinity issue, making it one of the key domestic and foreign issues of his presidency. Echeverría saw in the salinity problem the means to restore the prestige and credibility of the PRI in Mexicali and across the nation more broadly.

Echeverría made a new agreement on salinity one of the centerpieces of his administration. It fit perfectly with his self-styled populist, agrarian image and his activist foreign policy, both of which were calculated to restore trust in the PRI at home. In doing so, he ignored the advice of Mexican soil and water scientists who urged that Minute 218 be renewed. Discounting the scientific aspects of salinity, he instead embraced its political sides. Echeverría whipped up support for a new agreement in Mexicali by encouraging the belief in salinity as the catchall scapegoat for the ills of Mexicalense agriculture. More broadly, he played on long-standing tropes of Mexican nationalism by denouncing the salinity problem as U.S. imperialism, linking it to global discussions of decolonization and the Third World in the Cold War, and using it as a springboard to a more activist foreign policy for Mexico. His determination to win Mexico a new agreement coincided with a more receptive atmosphere within the United States. A new agreement reached in 1973 granted Mexico generous

concessions, a guarantee of water quality, and funding for the Rehabilitation project in Mexicali.

Evan Ward has written that, after 1965, the local perspective of Mexicalenses was “subsumed” as the salinity issue was taken up by officials in Washington D.C. and Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside the fact that government officials at the highest levels had dealt with the salinity problem since 1961, I disagree with Ward and argue that Echeverría embraced salinity not to subsume the Mexicalense perspective but to elevate it, precisely to restore the ruling party’s popularity in Baja California. This is evidenced by the way Echeverría’s approach to the salinity hinged upon the CCI. He cultivated close ties to the group in an effort to strengthen the PRI’s influence in Baja California after the 1968 elections fiasco. Following the pattern set after the elections’ annulment, the CCI endorsed Echeverría’s efforts in exchange for greater recognition within the PRI structure, starting with Garzón’s appointment as Diputado Federal in 1970. The resurrection of the salinity dispute institutionalized the CCI’s long road from subversive to subservient. Yet it also illustrated just how powerfully Mexicalenses and the politics of water had reshaped the Mexican regime and hemispheric relations from below.

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That Echeverría came to power in the midst of a crisis of PRI legitimacy is an understatement: Echeverría’s rise in many ways *was* the crisis. As his predecessor’s Secretario de Gobernación, Echeverría was tarred with the worst scandals of the previous sexenio. Díaz Ordaz’s time in Los Pinos had been characterized by a “climate of paranoia,

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<sup>1</sup> Evan R Ward, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 66.

isolation, and anti-intellectualism.”<sup>2</sup> His increasingly hardline and repressive approach to perceived left wing subversion culminated in the massacre of protesting students in Tlatelolco plaza on October 2nd 1968, in which a still-unknown number of students, probably hundreds, were killed by the military. Repression from the wide-scale to the small was, of course, nothing new under the PRI. But the target and setting – middle class university students in Mexico City, the showpiece of the Mexican Miracle – certainly were. For many Mexicans, the massacre brought down the last piece of the PRI’s facade of stability and semi-democracy. The historiography has labeled it a key turning point in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican history.<sup>3</sup>

As Secretario de Gobernación, Echeverría was directly, if not wholly, responsible for the violence. Echeverría had publicly supported Díaz Ordaz’s refusal to negotiate with the students, and had personally relayed the President’s order for the military to clear the plaza on the evening of October 2 (Díaz was vacationing in Ajijic, Guadalajara, at the time).<sup>4</sup> For many Mexicans, the nomination of Echeverría was a public declaration that the hard line would not soften. In the public’s mind, Echeverría had taken a straight path from Tlatelolco to Los Pinos.<sup>5</sup>

Echeverría, as a result, attempted a symbolic break with his predecessor’s reputation and to restore the PRI’s credibility. His efforts drew swift recriminations from the old guard

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<sup>2</sup> Jorge G Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power: How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen* (New York: New Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> A framing historians have recently begun to question; see, inter alia, Louise E Walker, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico’s Middle Classes after 1968*, 2013; on the student movement and the massacre, see Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, such observers of Mexico as Carlos Monsiváis, Julio Scherer, and Jorge Castañeda have floated the theory that Echeverría orchestrated the massacre in order to eliminate his rivals from the competition for the *dedazo* and to force Díaz Ordaz’s hand. See *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.



of the PRI. While campaigning in Morelia in November 1969, Echeverría called for a moment of silence to commemorate the victims of the massacre. The move so angered the military and Díaz Ordaz that the next day Echeverría gave a speech dedicated to the armed forces.<sup>6</sup> The scandal showed how much resistance Echeverría's efforts to reform the PRI's reputation for violence and scandal faced from within the party itself.

The internecine clash between Echeverría and the Díaz-Ordacistas was further highlighted after the June 1971 *Halconazo*, in which around a thousand armed members of a paramilitary group, the *Halcones* (Falcons), with the complicity of the police, attacked a group of students demonstrating in Mexico City in memory of the massacre, killing 50 and injuring hundreds more, even pursuing some of the injured to local hospitals and murdering them in front of the doctors and nurses treating their wounds. The *Halcones* had been formed in 1968 by the government of Mexico City, whose mayor was a member of Díaz Ordaz's cabinet. As Louise Walker explains, the clandestine group was funded through the city's Department of Parks and Gardens and was led by military men, who recruited former soldiers, gang members, taxi drivers and boxers and trained them in martial arts and firearms in the San Juan de Aragón zoo.<sup>7</sup> The massacre appears to have truly disturbed Echeverría, who appeared on television that night to denounce the violence, and days later fired the mayor and the police chief. Some speculated that Díaz Ordaz and his sympathizers had engineered the *Halconazo* to discredit Echeverría's efforts at reconciliation, while others believed that Echeverría himself had plotted the attack in order to manufacture an excuse to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, *Waking from the Dream*, 27-28.

fire two rivals.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the case, the attack demonstrated that Echeverría's efforts to rehabilitate the government's image could not address the PRI's actions directly without provoking internecine resistance and possibly violence.

As a result, Echeverría took on the party's crisis of legitimacy obliquely, by reviving the PRI's symbolic Revolutionary heritage. While Louise Walker has written that Echeverría's willingness to address and disavow the PRI's use of violence was a significant change in the broader history of the regime, I contend that this was a change of style rather than substance – the goal, after all, was to maintain the party's hold on power.<sup>9</sup> Domestically, Echeverría styled himself a populist in the Lázaro Cárdenas mold. He revived a pillar of Revolutionary discourse that Alan Knight has called "*Lombardismo*," after one of its main proponents, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the founder of the *Partido Popular Socialista* (Popular Socialist Party). Lombardismo, Knight wrote, was a form of pseudo-Marxist nationalism that replaced the exploited class with Mexico and the exploiter class with the United States.<sup>10</sup> Echeverría took this style to the people, making a point of travelling to remote parts of the country every eighth day, meeting face to face with campesinos in a *guayabera*, and frequently hosting community leaders and representatives in meetings. As Louise Walker writes, he decorated Los Pinos with Mexican indigenous and folk art, served *horchata* at official functions, and called his wife, María Esther, "la compañera Esther" (Comrade Esther).<sup>11</sup> Further, he announced a domestic policy of *Apertura democrática* (Democratic Opening), a reform of Mexico's electoral laws designed to enable greater

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<sup>8</sup> Yoram Shapira, *Mexican Foreign Policy Under Echeverría*, vol. VI, The Washington Papers (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1978); Walker, *Waking from the Dream*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Walker, *Waking from the Dream*, Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Knight, "Cárdenas and Echeverría: Two 'Populist' Presidents Compared," in *Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría*, ed. Amelia M Kiddle and María L. O Muñoz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Walker, *Waking from the Dream*, 26.

opposition party participation and representation. As Renata Keller has written, Echeverría's return to populism and agrarian symbolism was intended to restore the PRI's claim to be a Revolutionary party that drew its legitimacy from popular struggle.<sup>12</sup>

The populist style at home was paired with an activist role in foreign policy. Indeed, the domestic and foreign policy were explicitly connected: Echeverría turned to the world stage to burnish his Revolutionary credentials at home.<sup>13</sup> This turn to foreign policy was, in the view of one scholar, largely unplanned and instinctual, and developed increasingly over the course of his sexenio.<sup>14</sup> It began in 1971, when Echeverría made a speech at the United Nations, criticizing a new U.S. surcharge tax on Mexican imports, and calling for a *tercermundista* (Third World) alliance that would unite the non-aligned countries of the developing world to compete with the international clout of the United States and Soviet Union. The desire to win leftist credibility domestically was reflected in Echeverría's support for Chile's Salvador Allende, which included a trip to Santiago in 1972, and in 1973, a loan of \$80 million U.S. dollars and 400,000 barrels of fuel to Allende's faltering administration, at a time when Mexico's debt was growing and it was importing petroleum.<sup>15</sup> Echeverría's foreign policy, therefore, was very much connected to the PRI's ruling crisis at home, and reflected the difficulty of effecting meaningful reform measures within Mexico.

The salinity problem was an ideal candidate for Echeverría's populist internationalism. The problem slotted easily into a *Lombardista* worldview that painted the

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<sup>12</sup> Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> For Echeverría's populism, see Amelia M Kiddle and María L. O Muñoz, *Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010); Shapira, *Mexican Foreign Policy Under Echeverría*; Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*; Renata Keller, "A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico's Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969," *Latin American Research Review* 47, no. 2 (2012): 100-119.

<sup>14</sup> Shapira, *Mexican Foreign Policy Under Echeverría*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

United States as the imperialist obstacle to Mexico's development. Moreover, it was a foreign policy issue which aroused considerable passion within Mexico, even in places far from the Mexicali Valley. Finally, with both the CCI and the MLN neutralized (the MLN's few remaining members were jailed during the 1968 student movement<sup>16</sup>), Echeverría could whip up popular sentiment over the salinity problem without the risk of inadvertently giving credibility to opponents of the regime.

Echeverría believed his campaign for a new agreement on salinity would be popular across Mexico, but it had a particular focus on Baja California. Above all, it was intended to restore the PRI's influence in the Mexicali Valley. The elections fiasco of 1968 had severely alarmed the PRI. The triple threat of the pink bollworm, dropping cotton prices, and decrepit infrastructure had sown widespread unrest and disgust at the regime that crossed the usual boundaries of class and political affiliation.

The long-planned Rehabilitation Project had gotten underway starting in 1968, but had yet to produce noticeable results. The three years' of studies, consultations, and negotiations preceding its start had allowed the problems afflicting Mexicali's infrastructure to worsen. By 1971, SRH technicians estimated that fully half of Mexico's annual 1.5 million acre-feet of water was lost to evaporation and infiltration in the district's canals before being delivered to farmers.<sup>17</sup> Some progress had been made: 67 kilometers of canals had been lined with concrete, 1500 Ha of land leveled, and 277 farmers had been relocated within the compacted Distrito de Riego. Yet the work so far had not made a significant improvement, and at the beginning of the 1971 agricultural cycle, the Distrito de Riego would start charging

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<sup>16</sup> Carlos Maciel, *El Movimiento de Liberación Nacional: vicisitudes y aspiraciones* (México: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos, *Memorandum Técnico No. 294*, 1 June 1971. AHA, Consultivo Técnico, Box 27, File 189.

an added fee on irrigation water in order to pay for the works (a levy of \$1.50 pesos per Liter per second per 24 hours, or \$17.36 pesos per million cubic meters of water, up to a total of \$4800 pesos per hectare over 25 years).<sup>18</sup> Yet in spite of the charge, which was sure to be unpopular, the federal government had had to promise an additional \$200,000,000 pesos to fund the project. Echeverría saw potential in the dilemma. An activist approach to the salinity problem would win popular support in Mexicali, while a new, more favorable agreement on salinity could help to jump-start the Rehabilitation project.

What is perhaps most striking about Echeverría's desire for a new agreement is that it flew in the face of the recommendations of Mexican soil and water scientists. As described in the previous chapter, the positive perception of Minute 218 shared by CILA officials, based in a strict definition of the agreement's technical results, starkly contrasted with Mexicalense public opinion, which made salinity a catchall complaint for the many problems afflicting the Valley's agricultural economy. By 1970, a more precise scientific summation of Minute 218's effects could be made.

In August of 1970, the scientific commission of SRH and SAG scientists that had begun secret experiments on irrigation and salinity in 1966 (see Chapter Five) issued a confidential preliminary report on the results of its inquiry to the SRH. The commission had tested the variables of the volume of irrigation water, its salinity content, and the soil's drainage capacity for the four main soil profiles located in the Mexicali Valley for its three main crops, cotton, wheat and alfalfa. In a stark contrast to popular opinion, the report indicated that salinity was not the nemesis to Mexicalense agriculture that it had been made out to be.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

The report recognized serious problems with Mexicali agricultural conditions, including salinity. On average, the valley's soils had seen a minor increase in salt content. But the increase varied, depending on the natural permeability of the soils. It would be "extremely difficult," the scientists wrote, to determine if the increase was because of the greater salinity of the river, or was simply unavoidable in such naturally impermeable soils.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, improvements in agricultural methods, such as better seeds, field leveling, and fertilization, meant that "the study indicates clearly that it would be extremely difficult to demonstrate direct damages to the soils of the Mexicali Valley from the contaminated waters of the Colorado River, especially if the above mentioned techniques continue to be applied, which counteract the damages" caused by salt.<sup>20</sup> In other words, there was no scientific way of telling whether or how much the salt from Wellton-Mohawk had actually affected Mexicali's soil and agriculture – and its effect could be mitigated either way.

More surprisingly, the report concluded that salinity was *not* the limiting factor in successful agricultural production. The experiments so far had indicated only a negligible difference between irrigating with water with 1400 ppm of salinity and water with 1000 ppm. As the report stated:

The use of waters of 1,400 ppm of dissolved salts, from the mix of Colorado River water and the highly saline water from the Wellton-Mohawk Bypass Canal, when said waters are used for agricultural irrigation in which 100% of the Soil-washing Requirement [*Requerimiento de Lavado*; that is, the volume of irrigation water necessary to prevent minerals from accumulating in the soil], in the cultivation of wheat in Imperial Clay soils, or for cotton planted in Gila Light Phase Soil, have to date not produced a statistically significant adverse effect on per-plot production compared with irrigation with waters of 1,000 ppm of dissolved salts.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Comisión Para el Estudio de la Salinidad en el Distrito de Riego del Río Colorado, B.C., *Informe*, November 1976. Archivo Histórico del Agua, Biblioteca. Page 13. The interim report from 1970 was included in the final report cited here.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 53.

In other words, the salinity of irrigation water was only as important – or perhaps less important – than the volume of irrigation water. In soil with poor natural drainage, over-irrigation was more harmful than salinity, as it would keep the roots in contact with dissolved minerals, even if the level of salinity was fairly low. Under-irrigation was also harmful, as it would cause salts to build up in the soil rather than be washed down past the root zone. In soils with good natural drainage, salinity again was less important than the volume of irrigation water that was applied: water with quite high salinity could be used for irrigation if the volume of water sufficient to flush dissolved salts through the root zone was applied. Salt was not the main, or at least only, problem in Mexicali: the volume of water and the drainage capacity of the soil were equally as important.

The scientists' conclusions are startling, given the rhetoric, protests, claims, and conflicts that had circled around salinity over the previous nine years. Virtually all had proceeded from the assumption that the higher the salinity, the worse the effect on Mexicali's agriculture, economy, and political stability. Yet the experiments showed that, when the correct volume of irrigation was applied with the correct drainage, there was no difference between water with 1000 ppm salinity or 1400 ppm. Indeed, the report came dangerously close to supporting the view of Carl Hayden and others, that the salinity input from Wellton-Mohawk would not be a problem if Mexico had better irrigation and drainage infrastructure.

The scientists did not go that far. They cautioned that the experiments' sample size was still too small to be considered statistically significant, and that they told nothing about the potential long-term cumulative effects of irrigation with high salinity water. Moreover, since higher salinity required a higher volume of irrigation water, lower salinity overall was still preferable, if not paramount. The commission recommended, therefore, that Mexico aim

to receive water of 1300 ppm salinity content from the United States – virtually identical to the average mineral content that Minute 218 had achieved.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, Echeverría's approach to the salinity problem ignored contributing factors and focused primarily on convincing the United States to reduce the salinity of Mexico's water to the greatest possible extent. Echeverría and his administration purported to make claims based on scientific evidence, but the commission's report reveals the opposite. Echeverría was not interested in the solution deemed most effective by technocrats, but the outcome most desired by Mexicalenses – and thus most likely to foment support for the government of Mexico. For the scientists' conclusions contrasted starkly with the lived experience of Mexicalense cotton farmers. For them, the rise of the salinity problem coincided with the decline of the Valley's agriculture. As Martín Dueñas, a farmer interviewed years later by the political scientist Alfonso Andrés Cortez Lara, remembered,

The water coming from the Colorado was not even suitable for drinking... the lands became so hard for growing cotton and wheat, before the salinity problem occurred I used to 'pick up' 170 packs per hectare of cotton and such a yield was gradually getting down to 60 or 70 packs per hectare, then, I couldn't pay my credits and the banking system stopped financing my agricultural activity until the solution was found some years later.<sup>23</sup>

For farmers like Dueñas, the experience of farming in Mexicali and the sufferings it had entailed over the previous decade mattered more than the results of scientific experiments or the objectives of the Rehabilitation Project. Their experiences told a different story: the United States had added excess salt to the river, yields had dwindled, and making a living got harder. Whether Echeverría's pursuit of a new agreement was driven by sympathy for the farmers' hardships, or by a cynical desire to pander to their views in order to win their

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Alfonso Andrés Cortez Lara, *Transboundary Water Conflicts in the Lower Colorado River Basin: Mexicali and the Salinity and the All-American Canal Lining Crises*, (Tijuana: Colegio de la Frontera Norte), 2014, 51.



political support, it was an advocacy based in the exigencies of politics, not by science. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Echeverría's diplomatic approach to the question of salinity rested on a careful effort to cultivate ties with Alfonso Garzón and the CCI.

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Echeverría's campaign to replace Minute 218 with a new, more favorable agreement was preceded by an effort to bring Alfonso Garzón and the CCI back into the fold of the ruling party. While the group had drifted at the margins of influence between its schism in 1968 and the elections fiasco of 1968, Echeverría personally oversaw the institutionalization of the CCI as an effort to restore the PRI's influence and legitimacy in Baja California, where the CCI's affiliate the Liga Agraria Estatal remained an important, if somewhat diminished, player in local agrarian politics. Echeverría met with Garzón's when he visited Mexicali as a presidential candidate in December of 1969, and witnessed his speech at the public meeting on salinity, where Garzón had excoriated David Herrera Jordán and demanded a new agreement on salinity. The next month, Echeverría sent a representative to the CCI's annual congress, who passed on the future President's greetings, assuring the group he would always be their friend.<sup>24</sup> Whether Echeverría gave Garzón more explicit signals is unknowable, but by February, LAE Secretary General, and Diputado Local for Mexicali, Roberto Olivas Córdova reported that the group's members had been coming forward to encourage Garzón to run in the next election.<sup>25</sup> A month later, the Executive Committee of the LAE presented the Baja California PRI committee with a proposal for Garzón's pre-candidacy for diputado

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<sup>24</sup> DFS Report, 12 January 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 21, Folio 125.

<sup>25</sup> DFS Report, 10 February 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-1970, Bundle 25, Folio 326.

for the state's third district, the area surrounding Ensenada.<sup>26</sup> The proposal was accepted. Garzón would be the PRI's candidate in the elections held that August.

Garzón's candidacy sparked off intense division within the CCI, the worst since 1964, led by Humberto Serrano Pérez, the group's second-in-command up to that point. The DFS reports do not make clear precisely what caused the division, but the timing and subsequent events indicate that Serrano had wanted or expected to get the nomination himself. In any case, a bitter feud developed between the two men and their faithful within the group. The spat began in April 1970. Humberto Serrano had attempted to expel a handful of CCI members, including two members of the Comité Ejecutivo, for allegedly accepting bribes from DAAC officials to purposefully lose petitions from the group's members instead of filing them with the DAAC. When Garzón arrived at the press conference where Serrano prepared to announce the dismissals, he embarrassed Serrano by overruling him. The two men spoke in private for several hours, when they agreed that the suspected "traitors" would not be expelled from the organization but sent to join CCI branches in San Luis Potosí, Guerrero, and Chihuahua.<sup>27</sup> It is possible Serrano's effort had more to do with undermining Garzón's support within the organization than with corruption, but in any event a rift had been exposed between the two leaders.

The rift widened in May. Serrano and two other CCI members went to the *Procuraduría General de Justicia* (the public prosecutor's office) in Mexico City to file a complaint against landowners in Santa Úrsula Coapa, a suburb just north of the city's famous Estadio Azteca. The landowners had blocked a land invasion by campesinos who claimed to have a presidential resolution granting them the lands. Instead, Serrano was arrested on

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<sup>26</sup> DFS Report, 13 March 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 100-2-1-70, Bundle 26, Folio 46.

<sup>27</sup> DFS Reports, 17 and 17 April 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 21, Folios 318 and 323.

charges of dispossession, robbery and damage to property.<sup>28</sup> The next day, a crowd of 150 CCI members turned up at the jail for Serrano's preliminary hearing. He denied the charges and claimed the person responsible for the arrest order, Alfonso Crotes, owned land in Santa Úrsula and wanted to sell it to *fraccionadores* (land developers). In retribution, Serrano claimed, he had been jailed with drug addicts, who beat him and stole his clothes and food. Garzón, who had been informed of Serrano's arrest but was not at the jail, said he would make efforts to free him.<sup>29</sup>

By the next day the crowd outside the jail had grown to 250 people, made up of CCI members and residents of Santa Úrsula. By noon that day it had grown in size to 400, and a convoy of riot police arrived at the jail to disperse them. Serrano remained in prison.<sup>30</sup> 200 returned on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and Serrano was freed due to lack of evidence against him.<sup>31</sup> A week later, Garzón told Serrano that Garzón had secured Serrano's freedom by influencing a government functionary. Ominously, he also warned that if Serrano caused more problems, Garzón could have him locked up again, hinting that Serrano's arrest had been Garzón's doing.<sup>32</sup>

The conflict between the two men reached its climax in early August. The CCI was scheduled to hold its annual *Congreso Agrario* in Mexico City on August 2nd. This year the event would be special: not only would Garzón be close to winning election as Diputado Regional, but the meeting would also inaugurate the CCI's new national headquarters, in a brand new building (although its construction would not be complete until the autumn). The

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<sup>28</sup> DFS Report, 20 May 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70. Bundle 22, Folio 28.

<sup>29</sup> DFS Report, 21 May 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-970, Bundle 22, Folio 32.

<sup>30</sup> DFS Report, 23 May 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-970, Bundle 22, Folio 47.

<sup>31</sup> DFS Report, 23 May 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-970, Bundle 22, Folio 50.

<sup>32</sup> DFS Report, 3 June 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 63.

day before the meeting, Serrano and a group of supporters went to the old CCI headquarters and occupied it, turning away other members and calling for Garzón to resign.<sup>33</sup> A few days later, Garzón and the rest of the Comité Ejecutivo met for the official meeting at the CCI's new headquarters. Delegate after delegate publicly denounced Serrano and his supporters, accused them of a variety of acts of fraud against the group and treason towards its members, and voicing support for Garzón. The meeting ended with a vote to expel Serrano and his supporters.<sup>34</sup> At the exact same time, Serrano held a press conference at the old headquarters, where he announced that Garzón was no longer the secretary general of the CCI. All would be explained in a national meeting of the group's membership, he said, where he would show how Garzón had embezzled the group's funds and left its organization in disarray. He said he would "continue with the cleansing of the scoundrels [*sinvergüenzas*] and traitors of this Central, who violate the principles and ideology of *el C. Lic. G.D.O. y del Sr. Lic. Luis Echeverría Álvarez*."<sup>35</sup>

The standoff continued for the next few days, with each faction occupying its respective headquarters. Garzón's group elected new members to replace Serrano and his supporters, and filed complaints with both the PRI and the Procuraduría de Justicia about Serrano's occupation of the old facilities, which they called illegal.<sup>36</sup> Officials from the Procuraduría ordered Serrano to release two men who had been working as security guards in the building and had been detained there during the occupation, and to allow other CCI members to enter the building to collect their personal belongings.<sup>37</sup> Serrano "added that

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<sup>33</sup> DFS Report, 3 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 129.

<sup>34</sup> DFS Report, 7 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 147.

<sup>35</sup> DFS Report, 7 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 169.

<sup>36</sup> DFS Report, 9 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 176.

<sup>37</sup> DFS Report, 8 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 207.

Garzón had caused the division in the heart of the C.C.I. because he had continuously distinguished himself with his maneuvers to take absolute control of the organization, when he did not even have the support of the majority [of its membership], having neglected the permanent contact that must exist between leaders and campesinos... he expressed that he was aware that for no reason should there be agitation and division in revolutionary organizations, especially when the *Informe Presidencial* and regime change were imminent,” and agreed to cease attacking Garzón in the newspapers.<sup>38</sup> He would, however, continue to occupy the old CCI offices.

In the days that followed, the standoff settled into a new status quo. Braulio Maldonado resigned from his position as *Asesor General* [General Advisor] of the CCI, which had largely been a symbolic, figurehead-type role, and endorsed Serrano’s group.<sup>39</sup> The next day, Serrano announced the compromise solution that had been mandated by the Procuraduría: Serrano and his faction would be permitted to take over the lease on the CCI’s old headquarters but would not be permitted to continue to use the name *Central Campesina Independiente*. They would also have to allow Garzón’s faction to enter the building and remove or photocopy the group’s archives. The new group, Serrano announced, would be called the *Federación de Colonos y Campesinos de la República Mexicana*.<sup>40</sup> In one last unfortunate incident that same day, a CCI member loyal to Garzón arrived at the Serrano-held offices to use the telephone, unaware of the rift. Serrano’s supporters beat him up.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> DFS Report, 12 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 251.

<sup>40</sup> DFS Report, 12 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 275.

<sup>41</sup> DFS Report, 12 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 267.

On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, when the dust from the split had mostly settled, Garzón announced that the Electoral College had approved his election as Diputado Federal in Baja California.<sup>42</sup> For the first time since 1959, when his term as *Diputado Suplente* in the Baja California state congress had ended, Garzón had achieved an electoral position, one at the federal level. Barely six years before, Garzón had been threatened with death by the Mexican army, arbitrarily arrested and thrown in jail by the police, and harassed and stalked by the DFS, all while spearheading a movement to challenge the PRI government electorally by mobilizing those left behind by the regime's abandonment of reform. This was a rapid turnaround, to say the least, and a significant political achievement.

Garzón returned to Baja California in October. He met with the Liga Agraria Estatal and its new Secretary General, Pablo León Quintero, and visited ejidos in the Mexicali Valley to discuss the salinity problem. Underscoring the group's political success, León Quintero had been elected *Diputado Local* in August, taking over LAE member Roberto Olivas Córdova's former position. Garzón's tour continued through Sonora, Sinaloa and Nayarit, where he met with CCI members to discuss group matters, agrarian issues, and, one can imagine, basked in his new glory as Diputado Garzón.<sup>43</sup> He returned to Mexico City in November, where the CCI celebrated the official inauguration of its new headquarters building, located on Calle Enrique González Martínez (where it remains to this day). With 650 members and a representative of the President in attendance, Garzón showed off the building's features: the *salón de actos*, or meeting hall, the dormitories and kitchenette for

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<sup>42</sup> DFS Report, 12 August 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-970, Bundle 22, Folio 299.

<sup>43</sup> DFS Report, 7 October 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 22, Folio 392.

rural-dwelling members to use while in Mexico City on group business, and a restaurant open to the public.<sup>44</sup>

Garzón's appointment as deputy and the federal government's intervention in his favor in the dispute with Serrano, were part of Echeverría's strategy to restore the PRI's credibility by reviving the salinity controversy. Fostering ties with the CCI would be crucial to gaining popular support in Baja California for a new agreement on salinity. By offering the powerful but still vulnerable organization a modicum of influence, moreover, Echeverría was sure to win the group's full loyalty. The institutionalization of the CCI and a new agreement on salinity were both simultaneously the means and the ends to the restoration of PRI prestige and influence, locally and nationally.

The CCI appeared to relish its new place within the party. December 1<sup>st</sup>, Garzón wrote to Manuel Sánchez Vite, the national president of the PRI, requesting that the CCI's one million members be permitted to officially join the PRI's Agrarian Sector (its roster of agrarian organizations affiliated under the rubric of the CNC). He also asked that CCI members be permitted to run for electoral positions and participate in political campaigns, like other members of the PRI.<sup>45</sup> At the group's annual meeting in January of 1971, the banners festooning the Salón de Actos illustrated the CCI's ambitions, and the long road it had traveled from its founding seven years earlier. They read, "The CCI Will Forever Be the Vanguard of the PRI."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> DFS Report, 16 November 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-970, Bundle 23, Folio 3.

<sup>45</sup> DFS Report, 10 December 1970. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-70, Bundle 23, Folio 42.

<sup>46</sup> DFS Report, 7 January 1971. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-971, Bundle 23, Folio 58.

Efforts to replace Minute 218 got under way as soon as the one-year extension began. In May 1971, Echeverría called a special meeting about the salinity problem in his office in Los Pinos. In attendance were the Mexican officials most important to the salinity issue: the new Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores Emilio Rabasa, CILA Commissioner David Herrera Jordán, SRE legal advisor Oscar Rabasa, the President of the *Gran Comisión de la Cámara de Diputados* (Chamber of Deputies Grand Commission), Octavio Senties, the Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos Leandro Rovirosa Wade, and the head of the Dirección General de Límites y Aguas, Luis Cabrera. Herrera, Rabasa and Rovirosa described the recent negotiations regarding a replacement to Minute 218. The U.S. and Mexican ambassadors had traded proposals that sought to use water from new wells in the Yuma Mesa to replace the saline water being channeled from Wellton-Mohawk. But neither could agree on the volume of water that would be substituted, and whether any water diverted around Presa Morelos would be counted against Mexico's treaty amount. Moreover, the proposals left Mexico in a vulnerable legal position, as they appeared to be a tacit acceptance that subterranean water could be delivered as part of Mexico's treaty amount – which had been Mexico's objection to the Wellton-Mohawk project all along.<sup>47</sup>

Echeverría then laid out what would be Mexico's new strategy for getting an agreement to replace Minute 218. "The foundation of the problem is its juridical aspect", he said, and technical fixes would never solve the fundamental issue, which was "to determine with precision and guarantees, the quality of water that must be delivered to Mexico according to the Treaty of the Third of February of 1944."<sup>48</sup> He continued that they had to pursue the problem through diplomatic channels, and, if necessary, take the problem to the

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<sup>47</sup> José Juan de Olloqui to SRE, 12 February 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-1, Folios 71-72; Robert McBride to Emilio Rabasa, 20 March 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-141-3, Folios 135-137.

<sup>48</sup> Luis Cabrera to José Rojas Garcidueñas, 17 May 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-2, Folios 80-81.



International Court. He instructed Herrera Jordán to tell the same to his CILA counterpart, Joseph Friedkin. Mexico, Echeverría had decided, would seek an agreement that would resolve the juridical puzzle at the heart of the salinity crisis since 1961.

In spite of this determination, the negotiations again failed. David Herrera Jordán and Joseph Friedkin in the CILA-IBWC could not agree on anything: whether Wellton-Mohawk was a legal source of the Colorado, whether Mexico had a right to “virgin” waters from the river, and whether the Imperial Valley was upstream or downstream of the Mexicali Valley.<sup>49</sup> The two commissioners agreed that they had reached an impasse. At the suggestion of the Department of State, Friedkin proposed that new bi-national commission be formed to study the legal question, but Herrera Jordán recommended that the SRE reject the offer.

Next, the two countries’ ambassadors took up negotiations. The Department of State proposed an arrangement that would guarantee that the salinity from Wellton-Mohawk would be based on the “saline balance” for that area – in other words, the water would only be as saline as it would be under normal irrigation conditions, without the added salinity from the groundwater pumping and soil-washing of its highly-mineral aquifer. Mexico rejected the offer and the principle of saline balance as the basis for a new agreement. Whereas the U.S. proposal only intended to address the Wellton-Mohawk problem, Rabasa explained, Mexico wanted to control the salinity of *all* of the water delivered at Presa Morelos. Mexico wanted “acceptable” water, Rabasa said, not just “usable” water: it wanted the water at Presa Morelos to contain no more than 1250 ppm of salt on a monthly average.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Before the construction of the All-American Canal, Colorado River water had reached the Imperial Valley via the Mexicali Valley, so Imperial was technically downstream. After the canal’s construction, however, the Imperial Valley’s water source arrived from upstream of the Mexicali Valley. Memorandum of Meeting, 4 June 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-1, Folios 138-140.

<sup>50</sup> Emilio Rabasa to Robert McBride, 13 September 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-1, Folios 352-356.

In early October, the two countries formed a bi-national commission in a last-ditch effort to reach an agreement. It failed. The United States delegation stuck to its offer of a solution based on saline balance, and the Mexican delegation refused to consider it. On November 15<sup>th</sup>, Mexico and the United States agreed to extend Minute 218 for another year. The Mexican delegation had declined to accept a new temporary agreement without first defining the legal terms of the 1944 treaty. Now the time had come to focus on the legal issue alone. As Emilio Rabasa wrote, “Precisely because I believe that we have reached the conclusion that we disagree on the [legal] material, I find it logical that we seek a solution through juridical means, to end this controversy, if it reaches that extreme.”<sup>51</sup>

The failure marked a turning point. While Echeverría and his administration continued to voice their determination to resolve the juridical aspect of the salinity dispute, from 1972 they in fact pursued a different approach. Rather than negotiate legal issues or technical details, Echeverría began a campaign to incite popular sentiment and to pressure the United States based on internationally circulating ideas of fairness and justice drawn from the burgeoning environmental movement and the Cold War.

Echeverría’s political approach was summarized in a strategy memorandum dated March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1972. Archived alongside a crude English translation and titled “Memorandum on Considerations on the Salinity Problem,” the document stated that “The salinity of the waters of the Colorado River is a problem, and the destiny of all problems is to be solved.”<sup>52</sup> The Wellton-Mohawk project, it continued, only benefitted Arizona, and Arizona was the only riparian state that opposed a permanent solution to the salinity problem. It argued that the U.S. government was attempting to improve its international prestige and faced upcoming

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<sup>51</sup> Rabasa to De Olloqui, 3 December 1971. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-2, Folio 302.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum, 2 March 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-3, Folios 249-250.

presidential elections, making the time right for Mexico to push for a definitive solution once and for all. The English translation made the moral case even more strongly: “Mexico cannot accept, under any circumstances, the fact that a few meters from the border line, Arizona and California enjoy waters of very good quality (850 ppm) and only a few meters downstream from the same border Mexico should be compelled to use waters of bad quality (1,300 ppm).”<sup>53</sup> The salinity was not an arcane technocratic issue, or a legal problem of treaty interpretation, but a simple test of the principles of fairness.

The rise of the environmentalist movement over the preceding decade gave the Echeverría administration a new language in which to make claims based on fairness. U.S. environmentalism rose and came of age virtually simultaneously with the salinity problem. The movement coalesced around books like Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, labor and civil rights movements like the United Farmworkers, and wilderness preservation organizations like the Sierra Club. 1972, in fact, was a pivotal year for environmentalism, witnessing both the celebration of the first Earth Day and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

In early 1972, the U.S.-based National Wildlife Federation announced that it would hold its annual meeting in Mexico City, the first time the conservation group would meet outside the United States. Its leader, Thomas Kimball, explained that holding the meeting in Mexico City was a way to show gratitude to the Mexican government, for its creation the previous year of a sanctuary for gray whales in Baja California, the world’s first.<sup>54</sup> Several members of the Nixon administration would attend, Kimball said, and one of the main topics of conversation would be the salinity of the Colorado River, which Kimball called an

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<sup>53</sup> Memorandum, undated. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-3, Folios 367-370.

<sup>54</sup> “Las Sales en el río Colorado, ‘Grave Atentado Ecológico,’” *Excelsior*, 6 February 1972.

“ecological disaster,” one so bad that no plant or crop could be grown in the Mexicali Valley and a serious threat to the region’s “ecological balance.”<sup>55</sup> It is likely the Mexican government played a part in the group’s decision, but in any case it jumped at the opportunity to push the salinity issue.

Two days after the meeting’s announcement, the *Sociedad Mexicana de Ingenieros* (Mexican Society of Engineers) mailed an information pamphlet about the salinity problem to 26 engineering, environmental, and conservation groups in the United States.<sup>56</sup> In English, the pamphlet described how the salinity was “an unfair and anti-ecological consequence of a treaty made between our two governments in 1944” and how “we have been receiving contaminated salt water which has caused negative social and economic effects as well as an ecological imbalance in the affected area and in the Gulf of California.”<sup>57</sup> The pamphlet included a copy of a speech made by the *diputado* and engineer Renato Vega at the Mexican-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Summit in Puerto Vallarta in May 1971. It said, in part, “The valleys of Mexicali and San Luis Río Colorado received campesinos from all parts of the country, in a colonizing effort impregnated with a profound sense of social justice; over the course of the years the enthusiasm of many thousands of Mexicans converted that region into an example of the objectives pursued by the Mexican agrarian reform.” But because of the salinity, “unemployment and depression [*desaliento*] have taken over among the more than

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> The groups included the National Wildlife Federation, the Defenders of Wildlife, the Wilderness Society, the World Wildlife Fund, the Conservation Foundation, the North American Wildlife Foundation, the Wildlife Management Institute, the National Recreation and Park Association, the Water Pollution Control Federation, the American Water Resources Association, the Air Pollution Control Federation, the Geological Society of America, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Sociedad Mexicana de Ingenieros, 8 February 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-138-7.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

15,000 campesino families [there], seriously compromising the Mexican government's efforts to colonize and Mexicanize that region of our country.”<sup>58</sup>

The Secretario de Recursos Hidráulicos, Leandro Rovirosa Wade, gave the keynote speech at the NWF's meeting the next month. Rovirosa described how the poor quality of water delivered by the United States “has provoked the degradation of the environment of an important part of the Mexican territory and if uncorrected will cause unfavorable, and perhaps, irreversible changes.”<sup>59</sup> The saline Wellton-Mohawk waters, “distributed for irrigation, as well as contaminating aquifers by percolation [into the soil], constitute a serious injury to ecology, whatever part of the world where this takes place, and independently of International Treaties or considerations of juridical or political character.”<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the contaminating waters from Wellton-Mohawk, he described the efforts Mexico had taken to mitigate the harmful water that flowed northward into the United States, including the Morillo Drain (which prevented saline irrigation runoff from flowing into the Rio Grande) and a soon-to-be-opened sewage treatment plant in Mexicali that would clean the water flowing from the city into the United States via the Río Nuevo.

The two countries, he continued,

“have been resolving all the conflicts that have appeared on their borders, not only by following the treaties and the general principles of International Law, but also, which is more important, through their founding in the good will, in friendly sentiments, and in mutual aid... For us, the principal thing is the human problem of Mexicans and *estadounidenses* who live together in the limits of our countries. But beyond these questions, we believe that nobody has the right to convert a region of the planet into a salty desert... In a world in which the demographic explosion is a general worry, I believe that it is the right of everyone, whatever their nationality, to care for the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Leandro Rovirosa Wade, Speech to National Wildlife Federation, 11 March 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-142-3, Folios 282-305.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

ecological equilibrium, as the deterioration of waters and lands can cause imbalances of unforeseeable magnitudes.”<sup>61</sup>

It does not take an expert to surmise that Rovirosa’s description of the Valley’s “ecological equilibrium” was somewhat disingenuous. The Mexicali Valley’s ecology, after all, had been profoundly transformed by agriculture and irrigation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rovirosa warned that salt was converting Mexicali into a desert. Yet in terms of its climate, the Mexicali Valley *is* a desert – it was only the large-scale transformation of the environment that had made it habitable, let alone a viable agricultural area. The salt was of course anything but salutary, but was surely no more ecologically disruptive than the massive storage dams constructed upstream, the canals and ditches, the enormous volumes of water diverted for irrigation and municipal consumption. The Delta’s environment had long since been transformed. Colonization and development had ended the yearly cycle of flooding and sedimentation and destroyed flora and fauna and their habitats. Salinity was not some outside threat to the Valley’s ecology, it was an inherent part of the techno-politico-agrarian ecology that had been created through irrigation. Rovirosa’s appeal to the new language of ecology and environmentalism, therefore, was not at odds with Echeverría’s decision to ignore the advice of soil and water scientists who recommended Minute 218 be renewed. The two were of a piece with Echeverría’s pursuit of the salinity problem for political ends.

In April, the Mexican and U.S. government began planning for a presidential summit in Washington D.C. in June. In the lead-up to the visit, Echeverría increasingly began to court Mexicali public sentiment in favor of a new agreement. This incitement had two aims. First, to pressure the United States to concede in the upcoming negotiations. Second, and more importantly, to make the hoped-for agreement the means to restore the popularity of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

PRI in Baja California. In May, Echeverría made a two-day visit to the Mexicali Valley. It was a longer visit than either López Mateos and Díaz Ordaz had ever made to the area during their presidencies – Díaz Ordaz, in fact, had only visited as a presidential candidate. Unlike either president, moreover, Echeverría not only spoke openly about the salinity problem, but publicly proclaimed solving it his personal duty. He spent the day touring various ejidos, meeting with farmers and hearing the difficulties they faced making a life on the land, and also visited the SRH's *Plan de Mejoramiento Parcelario* project, the Cerro Prieto geothermic electricity plant, an asparagus cannery, and a number of canals and irrigation works.<sup>62</sup> As the newspaper *El Mexicano* reported, the farmers were “moved by the sincere concern [shown by] the man who controls the destinies of Mexico.”<sup>63</sup> In a press conference at the airport before returning to Mexico City, he promised to discuss the salinity problem when he met with Nixon in June and declared himself confident a solution would be found, promising to return to Mexicali in a few months.<sup>64</sup> Leandro Roviroso Wade also spoke, and quoted from his address to the National Wildlife Federation about the danger to Mexicali's “ecology,” adding “The favorable environment created by man cannot and must not be destroyed by man himself, looking only at the present moment and his own immediate personal interests.”<sup>65</sup>

Echeverría returned to Mexicali less than two weeks later. He explained that he had returned because he was determined to hear Mexicalenses opinions before his visit to Washington. For that visit, he said, “The salinity of the Mexicali Valley is my principal

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<sup>62</sup> Itinerary, undated. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 30-31.

<sup>63</sup> “Principio de Solución a la Crisis de Mexicali,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 15 May 1972.

<sup>64</sup> “De Sal y Braceros Hablará LE con Nixon,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 16 May 1972.

<sup>65</sup> “Atentado a Ecología Regional,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 16 May 1972.

concern.”<sup>66</sup> For two “exhausting” days he toured the valley once more, accompanied by foreign minister Emilio Rabasa, Leandro Roviroso Wade, and Julian Adame, the Secretario de Agricultura y Ganadería, as well as the governor of Baja California, Milton Castellanos Everardo.<sup>67</sup> A few days after the second visit, Echeverría announced that Mexico would soon take measures so that all of the water from Wellton-Mohawk would be diverted around Presa Morelos and wasted to the sea. No longer, he said, would the salt damage Mexicali’s soils and aquifer. Leandro Roviroso Wade said that the difference would be made up with an increase in groundwater pumping.<sup>68</sup>

Behind the scenes, Echeverría and his staff worked on a new proposal for a solution to the salinity problem that he would present to Nixon at their meeting two weeks later. Echeverría wanted an agreement that the two countries would reach a permanent solution in no more than five months time, and failing that, to resort to arbitration in less than five years. In the meantime, he would press for a new temporary agreement, lasting no more than four years, that would keep salinity at Presa Morelos below 1200 ppm and would allow Mexico to waste all of the water from Wellton-Mohawk without it counting towards its treaty amount.<sup>69</sup> This was ambitious: 1200 ppm was lower than what Mexico had demanded in the failed negotiations the previous year.

Echeverría’s public buildup of the salinity problem and the upcoming meeting appeared to be helping to create a receptive attitude in the United States. In mid-May, the U.S.-Mexico Inter-Parliamentary summit was held in New Orleans; at its close the commission issued a statement agreeing that the salinity problem was the biggest issue

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<sup>66</sup> “Firme Postura de México en el Caso Salino,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 28 May 1972.

<sup>67</sup> “Afanosamente LE Busca Solución al Caso Salino,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 29 May 1972.

<sup>68</sup> “Al mar las Aguas Salobres,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 3 June 1972.

<sup>69</sup> Echeverría’s briefing notes, undated. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-14302, Folios 24-26.



dividing the two countries and expressing support for a resolution to the problem.<sup>70</sup> A few days later, Democratic Congressman James Wright of Texas introduced bill H.R. 15109, which would authorize the construction of a diversion canal from Wellton-Mohawk to the Sea of Cortés. In Congress Wright described the salt as a grievous injury to a friend:

“the condition has continued largely unabated for more than 10 years. Life-giving crops have been destroyed annually by these contaminated waters. Poverty has begun to stalk what once was a fertile valley of productivity. Now the gruesome specter of irreversible ecological damage begins to hang like a dark cloud over the future of the region. Lands repeatedly contaminated by salt ultimately turn to desert... Already there have been deep repercussions in our neighboring country. Farm and student groups have engaged in demonstrations against their own Government officials for their failure to achieve rectification from the United States. The good relations so carefully nurtured by a generation of good deeds are jeopardized by this intolerable situation.”<sup>71</sup>

The bill did not pass, but awareness of the salinity problem and sympathy for Mexico’s demands were rising. This was likely not incidental but the result of a Mexican government publicity campaign. A week before Echeverría’s visit, the Democratic candidate for president, Hubert Humphrey, was quoted in the Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior* saying that “for reasons of moral character,” the United States should resolve the salinity problem and indemnify Mexicalenses for damages. He criticized Nixon for not taking a greater interest in solving the problem, and for taking the wrong approach on Latin America more generally: fear-mongering over Castro and rebuffing Chilean self-determination, even as the visit to China showed that it was possible for the United States to reach out to other governments and solve common problems.<sup>72</sup> Even the *New York Times* chimed in, noting that “When Mexicans talk about the relations between their country and the United States,

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<sup>70</sup> “Enturbia la sal la Amistad de México y E.U.,” *El Mexicano*, Tijuana edition, 19 May 1972.

<sup>71</sup> Congressional Record, 23 May 1972. Archived in SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folio 268.

<sup>72</sup> “Deber Moral de EU Resolver el Problema de la sal: Humphrey,” *Excelsior*, 5 June 1972.

they tend to mention first the problem of mineral salts in the Colorado River and its effect on agriculture in Mexico's Mexicali Valley."<sup>73</sup>

Just a week before the visit, Echeverría made his final move. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, the Mexican foreign minister Emilio Rabasa met in Washington with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Rabasa told Kissinger that "he had come on serious business" – the salinity problem.<sup>74</sup> He mentioned the Inter-Parliamentary summit's statement, Congressman Wright's bill, Humphrey's statements to the press, and described his own tour of the Mexicali Valley:

"He spoke of the land being covered with patches of salt, of crops withering, of people starving. He said these farmers, in talking with the Mexican President, did not just point out their problems. They demanded, he said--and repeated--demanded that Echeverria get a solution.

All of this, Rabasa said, left the Mexican Government with no alternative. He said that 'President Echeverria [sic] has no choice.' Mexico had to have the full quantity of water promised in the 1944 Treaty and Wellton-Mohawk water could not be part of the total. He also said that other drainage water was not acceptable. He said that unless we did something about the situation, Mexico would simply stop accepting Wellton-Mohawk water. That would reduce the total supply of water and it would produce a most serious situation in his country. He said he could not believe the U.S. wanted to see Mexicans starving and suffering, but that is what would happen--and he implied it would be our fault.<sup>75</sup>

Kissinger, clearly taken by surprise, replied that much progress had been made in recent months on the salinity problem and a "crash program" would be impossible in so short a time.

"Rabasa said that if something were not done in "5 or 6 months" Mexico would simply stop using 'bad water.' He also noted that President Echeverria would be travelling to key cities in the U.S. He would certainly be asked what he had accomplished on the Colorado River question and he would have to say that he had

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<sup>73</sup> "Colorado River Salt Annoys Mexicans," *New York Times*, 11 June 1972.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, June 8, 1972, 3–4 p.m.

National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 788, Country Files, Latin America, Mexico, Vol. III, 1972. Accessed 6 April 2016 <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d479>>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

failed to get a solution from us. (The clear implication was that this would turn the Mexican-American community against the Administration.)<sup>76</sup>

When Kissinger warned that Mexico's "ultimatum" might threaten the tone of the upcoming visit, Rabasa showed him a Department of the Interior document titled "Water Quality Criteria, which showed 1200 ppm salinity the maximum tolerable level for most crops. "This is your own publication, he said. But the water we are getting does not match this standard... He said that we were 'big' and Mexico was 'small' and we had to be generous."<sup>77</sup> Kissinger, due to leave in a few hours for Japan, agreed to look into the matter urgently.

Echeverría followed a packed schedule on his visit to the United States, a much lengthier and more extensive visit than his predecessors had made. In a span of seven days he visited Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago, San Antonio and Los Angeles. He met with Supreme Court justices, George Shultz, the newly appointed Secretary of the Treasury, Pierre-Paul Schweitzer, the head of the IMF, U Thant, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, and with New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. In each city he visited, Echeverría held meetings with representatives of the Mexican-American communities, especially businessmen.<sup>78</sup> After arriving on June 14<sup>th</sup>, he spent the night at Camp David, and the next day travelled to the White House for a meeting with Nixon.

Even before the meeting began, Nixon and Kissinger were prepared to offer major concessions. The night before, Kissinger had met with Emilio Rabasa and the two had reached a general agreement in which the United States would take immediate measures to lower salinity to the range of 1120-1150 ppm, a level well below the 1200 ppm limit the SRE had aimed to achieve. Additionally, Nixon would appoint a special representative to study

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Itinerary of Echeverría's U.S. visit, June 14<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 114-118.

the issue and propose a permanent solution within a reasonable period.<sup>79</sup> In a memo to Nixon, Kissinger wrote that he believed this would be sufficient to have Mexico drop its demands for “absolute parity” in salinity (i.e. perfectly equal salinity for Mexicali as the Imperial Valley received) and its demands for indemnities for past damages, although “We are willing to discuss this privately and confidentially with them through diplomatic and other channels.”<sup>80</sup> In short, by the time Echeverría walked through the door of the Oval Office, already he had all but won the concessions Mexico desired.

Nonetheless, he pulled no punches in his conversations with Nixon and Kissinger, which were documented verbatim by the White House. Echeverría rejected the notion that the salinity problem was a technical or legal one. Instead, it was a question of simple right and wrong. As he put it, “Mr. President, the problem, I think, has been also that... this issue has been left in the hands of technicians and of engineers, when it is essentially a political problem.”<sup>81</sup> This sense of unfairness, moreover, came directly from the Mexicalense people themselves, whose anger towards the United States was once again rising:

“In the past, the President of Mexico has never gone to the Mexicali Valley, which is the affected area and always studied this problem from a distance and usually reviewing the reports of engineers who were the ones responsible for distributing the water.

Within the course of the last month, Mr. President, I have visited this valley twice, and I’ve gone to many far and remote corners of the valley and talked to a great many of the agricultural people in the valley.

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<sup>79</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, June 15, 1972. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 932, VIP Visits, Mexico: President Echeverría, 15 June 1972 [3 of 3].

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, President Echeverría, and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, June 15, 1972. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Conversation No. 735–1, Oval Office. Accessed 5 April 2016, <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve10/d482>>

The fact of the matter is, specifically, Mr. President, is that people in California and Arizona use water that is considerably better than what is used by their counterparts in Mexico, just a little bit down the river.”<sup>82</sup>

The only just solution to the problem, therefore – “The moral point of it,” in Echeverría’s words – was for Mexico to receive water of a similar quality to California’s and Arizona’s; Echeverría suggested the two presidents issue a joint statement following their meeting to the same effect.<sup>83</sup>

Joining this moral appeal, Echeverría made a second, perhaps more threatening one, based on geo-politics and the goals of U.S. foreign policy. This appeal framed the salinity issue within the broader context of U.S.-Latin American relations and recent developments of the Cold War, namely the election of Salvador Allende. It framed the salinity problem as a way for the United States to improve its image in Latin America and score an easy victory against the appeal of socialism, Allende, and Castro.

“Echeverría: ...there is a great deal of interest in this in Mexico; there is a great deal of tension all over Latin America, and we are faced with a very real and a serious problem...

But I would like to leave one thought with you in your consideration of this: that the border of Baja California with the United States is more than a border with Mexico; it’s the American border with all of Latin America. And so, I think this is very important—

Nixon: Good point.

Echeverría: --for you to remember this; that this is, perhaps, the most important problem coming from south of the border, as far as the United States is concerned. And that, as I say, that the border there is the border between the United States and all of Latin America.”<sup>84</sup>

Nixon understood. Following a brief discussion of Latin American issues, he told Echeverría that:

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

“I think it’s very helpful that Mexico take a greater leadership role in the OAS, in matters like this. I am not speaking, now, that Mexico should take this role as any agent of the United States. But, I think that Mexico is in an ideal position to do so. And—Otherwise the leadership role may be taken by other leaders in the continent who cannot speak as, as effectively as can the President of Mexico... In other words, let the voice of Echeverría, rather than the voice of Castro, be the voice of Latin America.”<sup>85</sup>

But Echeverría drove point home even further. Bringing up Soviet and Chinese efforts to create “problems... in Latin America vis-à-vis the United States,” he warned that not even dictatorship or political violence could prevent subversion if there were social and economic grounds for discontent. In his words,

“it’s easier, easier to counteract whatever they are trying to do when you have a political system that provides the social and economic solutions to economic-social problems.

We are told in certain avenues, by certain Latin American leaders, ‘Well, we used to have a lot of problems with our members of Congress and our Senate, so we got rid of ‘em.’ [Laughter]

‘And now, we’re working better.’

But, underground, they can do a lot, still.”<sup>86</sup>

The message could not have been clearer. Echeverría posed the salinity problem as the sort of socio-economic issue that turned Latin Americans against the United States and into the hands of communist subversives – and implied that the problem was already doing just that in Mexicali. Solving it would not only be just, it would stem the socialist tide in Latin America and make Mexico a more outspoken defender of U.S. interests in the region.

Nixon agreed. The joint statement issued following the meeting promised prompt action permanently resolving the salinity problem. It also made official Mexico’s decision to no longer use any of the water from Wellton-Mohawk, instead by-passing it around Presa

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Morelos to flow to the sea.<sup>87</sup> While this went against the advice of Mexico's scientists, whose experiments had proved that volume of water was just as crucial as its salinity, the decision was political, not technical. It symbolically put pressure on the United States to act while making the point that no longer could Mexico's use of the water from Wellton-Mohawk be construed as a tacit agreement of the legal acceptability of those waters.

After the meeting, Echeverría spoke before both houses of Congress (although with reportedly less than full attendance). He had warned Nixon that the address would be frank, and it was – a thunderous speech criticizing U.S. foreign policy and proclaiming Echeverría's and Mexico's leadership of the Third World. The salinity problem featured prominently. It was the kind of speech designed not only to shame the United States, but to boost Echeverría's Revolutionary populist prestige at home.<sup>88</sup> The address depicted the world in terms of right and wrong. While the United States had inspired the world with its society built on freedom and peace, Echeverría said, a colonial attitude continued to drive international relations, with underdeveloped countries pushed around by richer ones. "The relations between our countries are, in a certain way, a mirror of the North American attitude towards the peoples fighting for their liberation."<sup>89</sup> He bluntly criticized countries, such as the United States, that would "reduce world politics to agreements between powerful nations" and warned that "the end of the Cold War cannot be the beginning of an era of peace [presumably referring to Detente] as long as weak countries are excluded from its benefits."<sup>90</sup> The Colorado River salinity problem, for example, was "an unacceptable form of discrimination" and warned that "the proportions of the damage are enormous and Mexican

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<sup>87</sup> Joint Communiqué, 16 June 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 126-130.

<sup>88</sup> Shapira, *Mexican Foreign Policy Under Echeverría*.

<sup>89</sup> Política Internacional: Memoranda. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 236-238.

<sup>90</sup> "Mexican President Cautions US to Remember 3rd World," *The Washington Post*, 16 June 1972.

public opinion is becoming ever more impatient with this matter of such great magnitude, which has gone more than a decade without being satisfactorily resolved.”<sup>91</sup> Recalling Nixon’s recent trip to China, Echeverría said that it was “impossible to understand why the United States does not use the same boldness and imagination that it applies to solving complex problems with its enemies, to the solution of simple problems with its friends.”<sup>92</sup> The speech was reportedly interrupted three times by applause. Secretary of State Rogers called it a stunning success, an opinion shared by the Mexican and U.S. press.

Following the speech, Echeverría was feted in a state dinner at the White House. He left the next day for stops in New York, Chicago, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. On his way from Los Angeles to Mexico City, he touched down in Mexicali. On the airport tarmac he gave a victory speech: Mexico would no longer use the water from Wellton-Mohawk: it would all be by-passed to the Sea of Cortés until the United States permanently solved the problem. Days later, the diversion gates at Presa Morelos were closed, and water in the Wellton-Mohawk was shunted around the dam, symbolically reflecting Echeverría’s hardline stance.<sup>93</sup>

A few weeks later, the U.S. and Mexican sections of the IBWC-CILA signed Minute 241 of the 1944 Waters Treaty, officially replacing Minute 218 and its extensions. The new Minute constituted the immediate measures that Nixon had promised to improve Mexico’s water quality, while a soon-to-be named special representative would study the issue and recommend a permanent solution. Under Minute 241, the United States would substitute 70% of the waters from Wellton-Mohawk with water from Imperial Dam and wells in the Yuma

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<sup>91</sup> Política Internacional: Memoranda. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 236-238.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> “Desde Ayer, las Aguas Salinas Salen Directamente al Mar de Cortés” *Diario de México*, 27 June 1972.



Mesa. Mexico would bypass the remaining 30% of the water to the Sea of Cortés, as it was already doing. This would lower salinity to an estimated 1140 ppm, down from the 1971 average of 1242 ppm.<sup>94</sup> Echeverría shared the good news with the CCI himself. A few days after Minute 241 had been signed, Alfonso Garzón and 300 members of the group boarded buses to *Los Pinos*. For two hours Echeverría met with the group, listening to their problems, noting their requests, and assuring them that his government wanted to resolve the country's "old and complicated" agrarian problems as soon as possible.<sup>95</sup>

Soon Nixon announced that his special representative for the salinity issue would be former Attorney General and longtime Republican Party insider Herbert Brownell. Brownell made his first visit to Mexicali in October. Stopping first in Mexico City, and then touring Guanajuato, Brownell flew to Mexicali accompanied by IBWC commissioner Joseph Friedkin and officials from the Imperial Irrigation District and the University of California at Riverside's Salinity Lab. He toured the region by plane and car, spoke with farmers, and met with officials of the SRH, SAG, and Distrito de Riego. Throughout his visit, Brownell projected a respectful, receptive, and concerned attitude, giving Mexicalenses the feeling that attention was finally being paid to their plight.<sup>96</sup>

Brownell was so perceptive, in fact, that he realized something that Mexican officials had been trying to hide, or at the very least, downplay. During his visit, Brownell commented to David Herrera Jordán that the soils of the Mexicali Valley would not be improved until the rehabilitation project was complete – whether or not salinity was reduced.<sup>97</sup> In other words, even if the United States followed through on its commitment to reduce salinity, crop

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<sup>94</sup> Press Bulletin, 14 July 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 223-226.

<sup>95</sup> DFS Report, 29 July 1972. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-72, Bundle 26, Folio 204. Echeverría

<sup>96</sup> "Interés de E.U. por Resolver el Problema Salobre," *El Mexicano*, 13 October 1972.

<sup>97</sup> Herrera Jordán to Rabasa, 29 November 1972. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-3, Folio 109.

production would remain low – and Mexicalenses’ resentment would remain high. Brownell had realized that Echeverría’s standard-bearing campaign over the salinity campaign had not merely been a recognition of Mexicali public opinion but a piece of political cunning: a redirection of public sentiment against the United States and in favor of the Mexican government. Brownell warned that “the United States believes that without the participation of the Mexican Government the international political problem that concerns it will not be resolved.”<sup>98</sup> The United States could not solve the salinity problem alone, in other words, even though the Mexican government had painted the United States as the sole party to blame for the problem.

Brownell returned home and over the winter the task force he led prepared its recommendations. Meanwhile, Echeverría cultivated even closer ties to the CCI. In November he granted an audience to CCI members who had traveled to Mexico City from various parts of the country; when the group could not procure enough buses to bring the members to Los Pinos, Echeverría instead came to the CCI’s headquarters, where he met with the campesinos until half past midnight.<sup>99</sup> In January, after the group had celebrated its ten-year anniversary, Echeverría met with a group of 1,250 of its members in a meeting at Los Pinos that likewise stretched to well past midnight. Echeverría listened as group members explained the problems attending rural life and requested government support in the form of new ejidos, agrarian credit, technical advise, irrigation, electricity, schools, teachers, highways, better prices for crops – and full recognition of their group within the PRI’s *sector agrario* (Garzón himself emphasized the latter).<sup>100</sup> As the meeting ended, Echeverría’s wife,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> DFS Report, 29 November 1972. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-72, Bundle 27, Folio 73.

<sup>100</sup> DFS Report, 17 January 1973. AGN, Galería 1, File 11-136-73, Bundle 27, Folio 229.

*la Primera Dama*, María Esther Zuño de Echeverría, gifted the group with a batch of children's toys, which Garzón said would be distributed among the group's poorest members.

It bears noting here how starkly different Echeverría's relation to the CCI was from previous presidents. None had ever met personally with the group before, let alone treated it as a base of support. Of course, such meetings served to publicize Echeverría's hoped-for populist touch; it was also made possible by Garzón's and the group's return to the PRI fold. Similarly, Echeverría's progress towards a favorable solution of the salinity crisis would have made him feel secure speaking to the group's members. With hindsight, in short, the meetings appear politically calculated. It is impossible to know what the actual members of the group thought about this, and whether they felt Echeverría was being genuine or not. But it surely would have been significant, and likely would have felt like a major achievement for a group that had been marginalized and even violently repressed under the preceding two presidents.

In April the San Antonio *Light* reported on the progress of Brownell's group's study of the salinity problem. The proposal, it was reported, would likely entail the construction of an expensive de-salinization plant to treat the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk. Such a costly method of cutting salinity's Gordian knot reflected, the article read, the strange logic of Colorado River development. As the article's author Sterling Noel wrote, the salinity had become a national *cause célèbre* in Mexico, with schoolchildren in Sonora, for example, tasked with writing about it as a school exercise. Americans should "cringe with shame" with how they had treated Mexico, while it was absurd that it was somehow politically impossible, because of the intransigence and political strength of Arizona interests, to touch problematic

works like Wellton-Mohawk.<sup>101</sup> It meant a solution could only be reached by pouring more money into the problem, this time in the form of a desalinization plant.

“Wellton-Mohawk emerges,” Noel wrote, in a subsequent article, “as the most ill-advised project in all the 60 years of public works along the Colorado... The major factor is that our developers of resources have never known when to quit.”<sup>102</sup> In 1961, “the silt hit the fan” and Mexicans began to protest. With little done in the intervening years to fight the problem, “It would appear... to the objective observer that what the Americans have been trying to do these past 11 years is impose their will and standards upon the Mexicans, rather than take the salt out of the river.”<sup>103</sup> Yet that was not the case: while the United States appeared not to care, it had, in fact, been trying to solve the problem. “The difficulty is that we are so entrapped in the ambitions of technology, of progress at-any-price, that way to do it is anything but simple.”<sup>104</sup>

The ambitions of technology, and an “any price” ethos, did in fact guide the definitive solution to the salinity problem. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of State William Rogers flew to Mexico City, with a confidential memo bearing Brownell’s proposal in his briefcase. “The United States’ basic proposal is to eliminate, as quickly as practical but in any event by 1978, the adverse effect of the Wellton-Mohawk drainage waters on the quality of the guaranteed annual allotment” of water delivered to Mexico under the 1944 treaty.<sup>105</sup> It offered two major concessions: a guarantee that Mexico would receive water of a similar quality to the Imperial

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<sup>101</sup> “What Caused Salinity of the Colorado?” *The San Antonio Light*, 10 April 1973.

<sup>102</sup> “Less Salty Water Still Goal,” *The San Antonio Light*, 11 April 1973.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> “Echeverría’s ‘Soup’ Remains Salty,” *The San Antonio Light*, 8 April 1973.

<sup>105</sup> Memorandum, 13 May 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-1, Folios 58-61.

Valley's, and an agreement that the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk would no longer count towards Mexico's treaty amount of 1.5 million acre-feet.

To improve Mexico's water quality, the United States had to release more fresh water from upstream. But since all of the Colorado's flow was spoken for, somehow the difference between the extra water provided to Mexico and the saline water no longer charged to Mexico would have to be made up. That would be achieved through two huge construction projects. The first would be a de-salinization plant near Yuma, to treat the saline water from the Wellton-Mohawk region's wells, lowering its salinity to a level safe for irrigation and consumption. The plant would use the reverse-osmosis method, which is not perfectly efficient but leaves a small proportion of extremely saline water. So the de-salinization plant required a second construction project, an extension of the by-pass canal to the Santa Clara Slough, a low-lying area of the Colorado River Delta close to the Sea of Cortés. The canal would carry the brine from the Yuma plant to the estuary, preventing it from entering the main flow of the Colorado River south of the border or infiltrating the Mexicali Valley aquifer.

The water pumped from Wellton-Mohawk would no longer count as part of Mexico's annual treaty amount. While the canal was under construction, the United States agreed to substitute additional water from upstream so that the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk could continue to be bypassed around Morelos Dam. In exchange for this concession, Mexico would agree to accept some minor increases in salinity to the water below Imperial Dam, which increases would also affect U.S. users below the dam (i.e. Yuma). Mexico also

agreed to regulate groundwater pumping close to the border. Both sides, furthermore, agreed to share and collaborate on scientific and technical information.<sup>106</sup>

The proposal delivered what Mexico had wanted all along: water of roughly the same quality as the last U.S. user – the Imperial Valley – received. The Mexican government rightly celebrated it as a victory.<sup>107</sup> Behind the scenes, the proposal rested on a quiet compromise. The United States agreed to stop delivering the saline water from Wellton-Mohawk to Mexico as part of its treaty amount (it would flow in the extended by-pass canal to the Sea of Cortés, without charge to Mexico’s annual treaty volume), and Mexico agreed to drop its juridical claim that delivering Mexico return waters as part of its treaty amount was illegal.<sup>108</sup> The agreement essentially removed Wellton-Mohawk from the complicated equation dividing up the Colorado’s water, and at the same time formally tied the quality of Mexico’s water to that of the Imperial Valley’s – the single biggest user of Colorado River water and one of the most important agricultural districts in the country. Wellton-Mohawk’s “removal” would be achieved by the construction, at federal expense, of the desalination plant in Yuma.

Rabasa and Brownell met in June to pin down the details of the agreement, and it was signed as Minute 242 of the 1944 Waters Treaty on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1973. The Minute stipulated that Mexico’s water at Presa Morelos would contain salinity no higher than 115 ppm above the water at Imperial Dam, with a permissible daily fluctuation of 30 ppm.<sup>109</sup> This slight

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Press Bulletin, 14 May 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-1, Folios 66-67.

<sup>108</sup> In fact, Leandro Roviroso Wade initially objected to the proposal, fearing it would set a legal precedent that in the future could force Mexico to accept saline groundwater or saline return water from other sources. Roviroso Wade to Rabasa, 18 May 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-1, Folios 81-85.

<sup>109</sup> In other words, on any given *day* Mexico’s water could reach as high as 145 ppm above Imperial Dam’s, but its average *monthly* water quality could be no higher than 115 ppm above Imperial Dam’s. “Salinidad Negociación 1973,” 7 June 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-1, Folios 148-152.

increase came from low volume irrigation returns that flowed into the river in the short distance between Imperial Dam and Presa Morelos. The agreement also limited each country's groundwater pumping within five miles of the border between Sonora and Arizona to 160,000 acre-feet annually, and required each to consult with the other over water projects that might adversely affect the other.<sup>110</sup>

The Minute contained one other victory for Mexico. Since the salinity problem had begun in late 1961, Mexicans had demanded that the United States pay an indemnity to Mexico for the financial damages resulting from diminished harvests, degraded soils, and other effects of the salinity. The United States government had refused, and Mexican officials had privately admitted that just proving that the salinity had caused such damages, let alone quantifying them, would be impossible. Nonetheless, Minute 242 committed the United States to securing Mexico funding “on favorable terms” for the rehabilitation of the Mexicali Valley and to providing “non-reimbursable assistance... for those aspects of the rehabilitation program of the Mexicali Valley relating directly to the salinity problem, including tile drainage.”<sup>111</sup> As José Juan de Olloqui recalled, during the negotiations the United States had been willing to offer money, but not to call it “compensation”; in his view it didn't matter – the money was a tacit admission of guilt.<sup>112</sup> Mexico thus had not just won a victory on water quality, it had also acquired funding for the expensive rehabilitation project.

Both governments praised the agreement. Brownell told the press that the agreement “demonstrates, I think very well, the U.S. policy of endeavoring to settle disputes with its Latin American neighbors on a friendly basis and not resort to courts or to other methods of

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<sup>110</sup> Minute No. 242, August 30, 1973. <<http://www.ibwc.gov/Files/Minutes/Min242.pdf>>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Memorandum, José Juan de Olloqui, 10 August 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-2, Folios 12-23.

settling the disputes; this is a milestone in the history of our relationships with the Latin American countries and is a very important, friendly, and amicable settlement of a dispute that has been very irritating and would perhaps be more so as time went on.”<sup>113</sup> (“Friendly basis” notwithstanding, the “other methods of settling disputes” were in evidence only twelve days later, when Chilean president Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup backed in part by the CIA).

Mexicalenses reacted optimistically, if cautiously. An editorial in *La Voz de la Frontera* warned that Mexico would have to wait years before the loans would come and construction on rehabilitation works would be completed. In the paper’s opinion the agreement, moreover, gave the United States many loopholes (“*salidas*”) to avoid compliance. But the paper nevertheless celebrated the agreement, and claimed that “what truly caused the authorities to concern themselves with the salt problem was not the deterioration of lands, but the massive protest of those affected and those in solidarity, a protest made clear in multiple demonstrations.”<sup>114</sup> While the symbolic victory of Minute 242 mattered, Mexicalenses would have longer to wait to enjoy its material benefits.

On January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1974, Congress ratified Minute 242 by passing H.R. 12165, The Colorado River Salinity Control Act, “a bill to authorize the construction, operation, and maintenance of certain works in the Colorado River Basin to control the salinity of water delivered to users in the United States and Mexico.”<sup>115</sup> The bill authorized not only the desalination plant at Yuma but a slew of salinity control works throughout the Colorado

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<sup>113</sup> Department of State bulletin, 30 August 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-2, Folios 197-199.

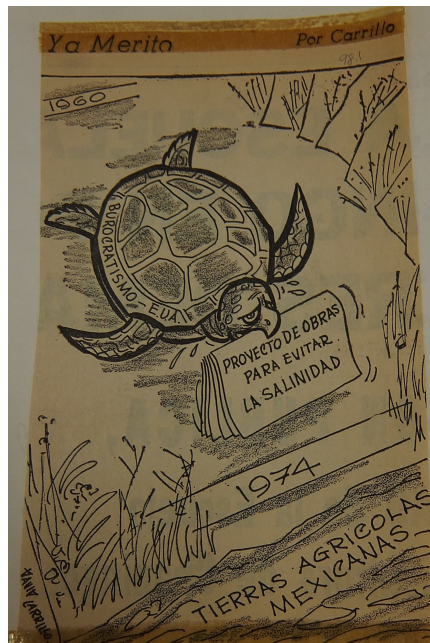
<sup>114</sup> “Microcosmos,” *La Voz de la Frontera*. 7 September 1973.

<sup>115</sup> H.R. 12165. Congressional Record, 21 January 1974.



River basin, all designed to help control the mineral content of water at Imperial Dam, and thus for Mexico.

A commemorative ceremony at Presa Morelos to celebrate the agreement was scheduled for July 1<sup>st</sup>, the day the Minute would go into effect. Yet the event stirred no great passions in Mexicali. Internal documents from the SRE show officials fretting that agrarian groups in Mexicali continued to complain of the effects of salinity, and that they believed the salinity problem had not been solved.<sup>116</sup> The anticlimactic reality that both bureaucracy and infrastructure construction move slowly had begun to sink in among Mexicali farmers. A cartoon in *Excelsior* expressed the sentiment, with the turtle of “U.S. Bureaucratism” (viz., red tape) slowly carrying the order for works to prevent salinity towards 1974 and the Mexican agricultural lands lying beyond it (see below).



*Excelsior*, 16 May 1974

<sup>116</sup> Memorandum, Dirección General de Límites y Aguas, 13 December 1973. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-144-2, Folio 271; Memorandum, 27 March 1974. SRE, Fondo CILA, File C-143-2, Folios 411-412.

When the day arrived, President Echeverría did not attend the ceremony; Emilio Rabasa spoke in his place. Also present were Leandro Rovirosa Wade, Baja California Governor Milton Castellanos, Alfonso Garzón, and Celestino Salcedo Monteón, representing the CNC. The event seemed listless and routine; it reflected little of the political conflict that the salinity problem had wrought over the previous nearly thirteen years. Of if it did, only in hints, such as an article in *El Mexicano* summarizing the salinity problem's chronology which noted blandly that "the lack of a prompt solution to the salinity problem made some members of the Comité de Defensa del Valle de Mexicali believe in the seeming impotence of the Mexican government to overcome the conflict, in the face of the North American denial [*negativa*] to hear the Mexican farmers' lament and the reason and rights that supported the national protests."<sup>117</sup> Yet no mention of Communists, police roadblocks, electoral campaigns, *plantones*, or political strife made it into the article.

Instead the ceremony became a massive show of appreciation for the President. Governor Castellanos hailed Echeverría as the only president "who understood the need to come to the Mexicali and San Luis Valleys to see the sadness reflected in the [farmers'] faces, the tears of discouragement, the gradual impoverishment of the land and the despair of our men of the fields, to take up with patriotic passion the defense of the farmers of the region and to demand to the North American government the end of an international problem in which reason and justice were on our side."<sup>118</sup> Garzón and the other agrarian leaders present thanked Echeverría and exhorted "their class companions to respond with an even

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<sup>117</sup> "Cronología del Problema Salino," *El Mexicano*, 1 July 1974.

<sup>118</sup> "Triunfo del Derecho: no más sal," *El Mexicano*, 2 July 1974.

more enthusiastic return to their labor in order to meet the needs of a growing national population.”<sup>119</sup>

Decades after the event, some Mexicali farmers remembered the signing of Minute 242 more for its political significance than its material effect on agriculture. It represented for them a rare moment when the efforts of local leaders brought the President’s personal attention to the hardships of farming in Mexicali, reaffirming their importance and vindicating their perspective. Of the nine farmers interviewed recently by the political scientist Alfonso Andrés Cortez Lara, all nine “commented on the leadership of the President of Mexico Luis Echeverría in his being imperative in advancing the process and achieving compensation” from the United States; six of the nine called the CCI “particularly outstanding in effort” and Garzón “the main promoter and defender” of the movement demanding an end to the salinity. As the farmer Martín Dueñas put it, “Just a few months after the President visited the Mexicali Valley to see the problems occurring in our lands, agricultural credit started flowing and we were able to continue working our crops with the money that the President sent to us.”<sup>120</sup>

These recollections underscore one of the most overlooked dimensions of the resolution of the salinity problem, its political aims. Minute 242 has been portrayed by both the Mexican government and scholars as the natural and inevitable end to a long-standing technical problem with major political consequences. Yet the archival evidence reveals that the agreement was by no means inevitable. Indeed, Mexican scientists and technicians had recommended against it. Instead, Minute 242 was a political solution to the PRI’s twinned crises of credibility in Mexicali and across the nation more broadly. It had several objectives:

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Cortez Lara, *Transboundary Water Conflicts*, 56-58.

to restore Mexicalenses' faith in the ruling party after the decline of agriculture and the elections of 1968 (partly by fomenting links with the PRI's erstwhile rival the CCI), to restore Mexicans' belief that the PRI and Echeverría were a Revolutionary vanguard capable of standing up the United States, and, while less publicized, to help secure outside funding for the expensive Rehabilitation Project of the Distrito de Riego. If the recollections of the ceremony and the salinity crisis cited above are to be believed, Minute 242 was an undisputable victory for Echeverría, the PRI, and the Mexicali Valley, at least in the short term. Events since then, as the Conclusion will show, paint a more ambivalent picture.

## Conclusion

At the southern end of the Colorado River delta, near the Sea of Cortés, the *Ciénega de Santa Clara* (Santa Clara Marsh) offers a glimpse of the river's ecological past. The 6,000-hectare marsh, an important stop for migratory birds and home to several endangered species, is all that remains of the enormous marsh that once sprawled across the vast floodplain of the Lower Colorado River, from Puerto Peñasco to Yuma. In 1922, Aldo Leopold, the pioneering environmentalist, explored the Delta by canoe with his brother, a trip later remembered in *A Sand County Almanac*:

‘He leadeth me by still waters’ was to us only a phrase in a book until we had nosed our canoe through the green lagoons. If David had not written the psalm, we should have felt constrained to write our own. The still waters were of a deep emerald hue, covered by algae, I suppose, but no less green for all that. A verdant wall of mesquite and willow separated the channel from the thorny desert beyond. At each bend we saw egrets standing in the pools ahead, each white statue matched by its white reflection. Fleets of cormorants drove their black prows in quest of skittering mullets; avocets, willets, and yellow-legs dozed one-legged on the bars; mallards, widgeons, and teal sprang skyward in alarm. As the birds took the air, they accumulated in a small cloud ahead, there to settle, or to break back to our rear. When a troop of egrets settled on a far green willow, they looked like a premature snowstorm.<sup>1</sup>

The passage would still describe the Ciénega today, nearly one hundred years later.<sup>2</sup> What has changed is the marsh's size. Before large-scale diversions of the Colorado began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Colorado River delta was home to the largest desert climate wetland in the world. Today, the Ciénega is all that remains.

Just across the U.S.-Mexico border is arguably the Ciénega's symbolic opposite, the Yuma Desalting Plant (YDP). When completed in 1992, it was the world's largest and most

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, Charles Walsh Schwartz, and Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac. With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bergman and Defenders of Wildlife, *Red Delta: Fighting for Life at the End of the Colorado River* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Pub., 2002).

technologically advanced desalinization plant, costing \$250 million dollars and 17 years to construct. The plant is capable of purifying 96 million gallons of water per day, totaling more than 100,000 acre-feet per year. It employs the reverse osmosis process, the same used in many home filtration systems, in which a cylinder, usually about a foot long, is affixed to the faucet or the pipes underneath the sink. Within the cylinder, water is forced under pressure through a semi-permeable membrane, which prevents the passage of dissolved mineral salts, bacteria and other impurities. In the YDP, there are 10,000 of those cylinders, and each is twenty feet long. It is a technologically complex, energy-intensive process, but it produces fresh water good enough to drink or irrigate with, as well as a smaller volume of concentrated brine containing the filtered salt content.

The YDP is unusual in two ways. First, its location: unlike every other of the world's major reverse osmosis facilities, which make drinking water from seawater, the Yuma plant is nowhere near the coast. It is more than 70 miles to the Sea of Cortés to the south and more than 140 miles west to the Pacific. In fact, the YDP treats groundwater, not seawater: it filters the saline groundwater pumped from beneath the nearby Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District to improve irrigation drainage there. The YDP purifies the water so that Arizona can use every possible drop of its share of Colorado River water while still fulfilling Mexico's annual allotment.

The second oddity about the YDP is that for most of its 22-year existence it has sat idle. Construction of the plant began in 1975, and took far longer than expected. By its completion in 1992, a series of unusually rainy years, especially the El Niño event of 1982-1983, had doused the Colorado basin and filled its reservoirs to capacity (and beyond, most notably in the case of Glen Canyon Dam, which came perilously close to catastrophic failure

in 1983). The YDP's water, which costs \$300 dollars per acre-foot to purify, no longer made financial sense to produce. So except for a handful of partial-capacity test runs, the plant has sat mothballed, kept on standby at a cost of \$6 million dollars of taxpayer money per year. "Has it been called a white elephant?" asked Pat Mulroy, the general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority and a widely respected innovator when it comes to saving, scrounging, stretching, and re-purposing municipal water: "You bet it has."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the YDP seems to personify the contemporary Colorado, a river as technological as it is ecological, more modified and divided than perhaps any other river on earth. With the Colorado River basin currently reeling from the effects of what may be the most severe drought in a millennium, moreover, calls for the plant to be put back into operation are becoming more strident.

If the Ciénega appears to be the opposite of the YDP, the appearance is deceiving. Far from opposites, the two are fraternal twins, born of the same events – specifically, the Colorado River salinity dispute and Minute 242 that resolved it. Connecting the YDP and the Ciénega is a 37-mile long canal, designed to carry the concentrated brine that is the byproduct of reverse-osmosis desalinization. When the YDP was planned in 1974, the wetland did not exist: it was merely a low-lying area in the Sonoran Desert, deemed a safe place to store the plant's briny waste where it would not seep back into the Mexicali Valley's groundwater. The YDP's stillbirth meant that the groundwater it was meant to purify instead flowed through the canal, rapidly filling the depression at its terminus. The water, while intolerably salty for agriculture with more than 5,000 ppm of dissolved mineral solids,

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Perry, "A Fresh Start for Yuma Desalting Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/01/local/la-me-water-20100501-15>.

proved perfectly suited for the delta's salty hardy estuarine flora and fauna. The wetland was born, and grew rapidly.

Minute 242 had other unforeseen, if not ambivalent, outcomes. The signing of the Colorado River Salinity Control Act had no immediate effect on Mexicali, which continued to receive water under the terms of Minute 241 while the works required by Minute 242 were constructed. The Wellton-Mohawk canal extension was finally completed in 1977. In the meantime, the Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos' Rehabilitation Project accelerated. By the late 1970s, the project had achieved most of its infrastructural goals. 2,902 km of canals had been lined with concrete, and 1,515 km of open ditch drains constructed. 180,000 hectares of land had been leveled, 285 wells repaired, 189 more dug, 1,378 km of roads paved, 150 km of telephone lines laid, and 1,812 farmers and their families re-accommodated within the new boundaries of the compacted Distrito de Riego. The eventual cost of the project eventually swelled to almost three billion pesos (see table below).<sup>4</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Spent (Millions of Pesos)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Spent (Millions of Pesos)</b>
1968	11.6	1974	299.2
1969	77.1	1975	494.6
1970	186.3	1976	451.1
1971	284.6	1977	260.6
1972	315.2	1978	186.3
1973	279.2	<b>Total:</b>	2845.8

*Source: Adalberto Walther Meade, El Valle de Mexicali (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1996), 165.*

Yet the age of cotton monoculture in the Mexicali Valley was ending. The improvements to infrastructure could not eliminate the pink bollworm or stabilize the global

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<sup>4</sup> Adalberto Walther Meade, *El valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, B.C.: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1996), 155-165.



price of cotton, which became increasingly volatile over the decade. Farmers who secured loans and planted cotton during a boom year were bankrupted when the price dropped the next, and more and more farmers turned to other crops. In 1973 the *Jabonera*, the Anderson Clayton subsidiary and the largest of the Valley's cotton processing factories, shut its doors, sounding the death knell of the industry.<sup>5</sup> Some farmers diversified to other crops, such as table produce like asparagus and onions, while others planted fodder such as alfalfa, which was used to fatten cows in the feedlots that began to appear in the latter part of the decade. Yet none of these crops could match the prosperity that cotton had briefly brought to the Valley in the 1950s and early 60s. Many farmers left farming altogether, others sought employment across the U.S. border or in the *maquiladora* factories that appeared in ever greater numbers along the border. More and more of the Colorado River's water was turned towards industry. In 1975, the SRH completed the Río Colorado-Tijuana Aqueduct, which carried the river's water 240 km westward (and over the 1060 meter-high peak at La Rumorosa) to the burgeoning border city.

Water problems continued despite Minute 242 and the Rehabilitation Project. Indeed, Mexicali's aquifer continued to drop after the Rehabilitation works. While the paving of canals and construction of drains had increased the efficiency of use of water, it had also cut off the aquifer from its main recharge source: the water that had infiltrated the ground from distribution canals and irrigation. Indeed, years later many Mexicalense farmers had ambivalent feelings about the Rehabilitation Project. As one farmer remembered,

During the salinity crisis, rumors circulated among farmers of the whole Mexicali Valley in regard to the reason why the Americans mixed and sent salty waters to Mexico. One of the widespread comments among us and under the strong control of

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<sup>5</sup> For a well-illustrated memoir of life in the Jabonera, see James Griffin and Aidé Grijalva, *Aquellos años del algodón: la Jabonera y el Valle de Mexicali* (Mexicali, Baja California, México: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2008).

union leaders and officials both belonging to PRI, was that everything was part of a ‘big show’ and that the so-called ‘deliberate’ pollution had already been negotiated at high spheres of both governments. And, as a result of Mexico’s acceptance [of the damage], the Mexicali Valley might later receive significant compensation to modernize the Irrigation District. This is why leaders and officials were so closed mouthed about communicating details on technical information about the negotiation process.<sup>6</sup>

Others recalled corruption and delays plaguing the project, or the incompetence of the technicians in charge of carrying out the work. In the end the Rehabilitation Project was never completely finished.

The political consequences were similarly ambivalent. The CCI to this day remains aligned with the PRI and powerful in Baja California. Alfonso Garzón stayed at the head of the organization and became a powerful local political broker. He held four terms as *Diputado* and eventually became a senator. He publicly broke with President Carlos Salinas over the latter’s reform of Article 27 of the Constitution to permit land privatization. He died in 2006. His son, also named Alfonso Garzón, became a PRI *Diputado*.

In spite of the enormous Rehabilitation Project and Echeverría’s personal attention, Baja California continued to elude the PRI’s hold on power. While the CCI became a bastion of PRI influence among rural-dwellers, the constant movement of people and commerce in the border region made it difficult for the ruling party to establish lasting institutions of political control. The PAN, while weakened by the repression following the 1968 elections, returned to strength in the 1970s. In 1989 the PAN made history when Ernesto Ruffo Appel won election as the governor of Baja California, the first time ever that the PRI had lost a state governorship (a significant, if dubious, achievement, for the electoral victory came as the result of *concertación*, or an informal deal in which the PRI did not contest the PAN’s

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Alfonso Andrés Cortez Lara, *Transboundary Water Conflicts in the Lower Colorado River Basin: Mexicali and the Salinity and the All-American Canal Lining Crises* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2014), 64-65.

victory, while the PAN agreed not to challenge the PRI elsewhere). The PRI lost the presidency eleven years later, and Baja California has remained a PAN stronghold.

These events underscore the fundamental role of environmental change in shaping the local machinations of national politics and foreign policy in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. This dissertation has argued that ecological change in the Colorado River delta, shaped by the imperatives of Cardenista agrarian reform and the PRI's authoritarian rule, fomented the PRI's crisis of legitimacy in the early 1960s. The effects of the salinity exacerbated local tensions and fueled an unprecedented national challenge to the PRI's Revolutionary credibility, inspired in part by the Cuban Revolution. The inability of the PRI to quickly resolve the salinity problem, I argue, helped push it towards closer relations with Cuba, while the PRI's ability to use domestic protests to pressure the United States helped it to secure an agreement on salinity in 1965. With the agreement imminent, the PRI could resort to aggressive repression to neutralize the remaining opposition groups. Indeed, the PRI's manipulation of the salinity problem proved so effective, that Luis Echeverría revived the issue in 1971, against the advice of scientists, in order to restore the ruling party's tarnished reputation and counter the effects of the decline of cotton agriculture in Mexicali. Environmental change along the river fomented a crisis of local, national, and international politics, while the resolution of the political dispute in turn re-ordered the layout and ecology of the river, most notably in the Rehabilitation Project, the Yuma Desalting Plant, and the Ciénega de Santa Clara.

The story holds implications for the historiography of modern Mexico. It tells us that the environment was more than just a tableau upon which the development of the post-Revolutionary state took place. The PRI, of course, drew power from its control over

environmental change – through agrarian reform, forestry policy, the expropriation of the petroleum industry, and the creation of national parks. Yet the environmental also played a role in challenging the regime, and in shaping it from below. Environmental issues such as the salinity problem motivated grassroots political actors – their decisions to oppose or support the PRI were not merely ideological but reflected the changing ecological conditions of everyday life. But the bigger point is that the changing environment itself played a political role, constraining the choices of political actors, rewarding or defying state projects, and shaping the terrain of politics in unexpected and unforeseen ways. This happened not only at the local level, but also at the lofty altitudes of national politics and foreign relations. Environmental change both challenged the power of the PRI, and offered the means to strengthen it – in the case of the Colorado River salinity problem, by using the Cold War to out-source the remaking of the Colorado Delta to the United States. The river, it might be said, scored its own victories, such as the surprising resurrection of the Colorado River Delta habitat in the Ciénega de Santa Clara.

The resolution of the salinity issue presaged an era of surprising cooperation on the Colorado. With the salinity of Mexico's water tied to the salinity of the Imperial Valley's water, both countries had a shared incentive to work together on river issues. The IBWC-CILA has signed dozens of Minutes resolving issues of joint importance. The 1983 La Paz agreement established a framework for cooperation on environmental issues in the region, and since 2003 the Environmental Protection Agency and the *Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* have worked together on projects to increase bottom-up citizen participation on borderlands environmental issues.<sup>7</sup> The usual cross-border tensions remain,

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<sup>7</sup> Summitt, *Contested Waters*, 194.

of course: groundwater rights remain an open question, pollution of the New River in California from Mexicali's municipal sewage is still a cause of irritation, and the lining of the All-American Canal in the early 2000s – cutting off parts of the Mexicali Valley from a source of groundwater from infiltrations from the canal – caused considerable anger in Mexico. Yet bi-national cooperation has achieved some major successes, giving a cautious vote for optimism. A recent agreement permits Mexico to store water in U.S. reservoirs until needed, reducing waste, while a bi-national effort in 2014 to restore riparian habitats by releasing a pulse flow to mimic the Colorado's pre-damming spring floods succeeded beyond expectations: for the first time in decades the river reached the sea.<sup>8</sup>

The Ciénega de Santa Clara's future is uncertain. Legally speaking, the water that sustains it belongs to the United States, and could be “optioned” by bringing the YDP back into operation. Probably in recognition of this fact, in 1993 the Mexican government preemptively declared the area the *Reserva de la Biósfera Alto Golfo de California y Delta del Río Colorado* (The Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve) under a United Nations program. While the Reserve does not legally supersede the Treaty of 1944, it would doubtless engender considerable opposition among environmentalists to the future possibility of re-starting the YDP. What role the river will play, in a future clouded by global climate change, remains to be seen.

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<sup>8</sup> “Colorado River Reunites With Sea of Cortez,” *Discover Magazine*, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://discovermagazine.com/2015/jan-feb/14-a-river-resurrected>.

**Appendix I**  
**Mexicali Valley Crop Production, 1954-1969**

Source: Archivo Histórico del Agua, Consultivo Técnico, Box 13, File 61

**1954-1955**

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	4401	7	1.6	6.5
<b>Safflower</b>	0			
<b>Barley</b>	450	0.7	1.6	0.4
<b>Oats</b>	0			
<b>Garlic</b>	82	0.2	3	0.9
<b>Corn</b>	58	0.1	1.43	0.1
<b>Cotton</b>	195159	317	1.573 (2.1 bales per hectare)	701.5
<b>Sorghum</b>	32	0	1.343	1
<b>Alfalfa</b>	7124	66.3	9.29	26.5
<b>Asparagus</b>				
<b>Other</b>	436			0.6
<b>Total</b>	217722			736.5

**1955-1956**

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	9615	15.4	1.6	16.5
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	853	1.4	1.6	0.5
<b>Oats</b>	52	0.1	2.846	0.1
<b>Garlic</b>				
<b>Corn</b>	390	0.9	2.233	0.8
<b>Cotton</b>	160385	224.5	1.4 (1.9 bales per hectare)	557.1
<b>Sorghum</b>	35	0.1	2.2	0.1
<b>Alfalfa</b>	6864	54.9	8	26.4
<b>Asparagus</b>				
<b>Other</b>	410			20.9
<b>Total</b>	178604			622.4

## 1956-1957

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	19809	49.5	2	54.5
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	130	0.1	2	0.2
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	10	0	2.5	0.1
<b>Corn</b>	398	0.7	1.751	0.8
<b>Cotton</b>	183628	280	1.525 (2.0 bales per hectare)	700.1
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	3261	25.1	8	12.5
<b>Asparagus</b>				
<b>Other</b>	169			0.1
<b>Total</b>	220275			768.3

## 1957-1958

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	14509	27.6		30.3
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	499	2	4	0.7
<b>Oats</b>	154	0.6	4	0.2
<b>Garlic</b>	29	0.1	3	0.2
<b>Corn</b>	2194	4	1.809	3.9
<b>Cotton</b>	190479	301	1.58 (2.1 bales per hectare)	640.7
<b>Sorghum</b>				23.7
<b>Alfalfa</b>	5718	41.7	7.294	
<b>Asparagus</b>				0.4
<b>Other</b>	358			
<b>Total</b>	213940			700.1

## 1958-1959

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	25358	50.4	1.901	54.5
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	795	1.2	1.5	0.7
<b>Oats</b>	150	0.4	2.673	0.1
<b>Garlic</b>	102	0.3	3	0.8
<b>Corn</b>	3751	7.5	2	6.6
<b>Cotton</b>	142724	239.8	1.68 (2.2 bales per hectare)	535.7
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	5721	41.6	7.269	15.8
<b>Asparagus</b>				
<b>Other</b>	1681			2.4
<b>Total</b>	181462			616.6

## 1959-1960

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	42613	91.3	2.142	100.4
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	558	0.8	1.461	0.5
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>				
<b>Corn</b>	1649	3	1.8	2.4
<b>Cotton</b>	139974	290.4	2.075 (2.8 bales per hectare)	573.7
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	4217	40.1	9.5	16
<b>Asparagus</b>	202	0.2	1.005	0.6
<b>Other</b>	498			4.9
<b>Total</b>	189711			798.5



## 1960-1961

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	45173	119.8	2.653	131.8
<b>Safflower</b>	135	0.4	2.696	0.5
<b>Barley</b>				
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	174	0.5	3	1
<b>Corn</b>	1800	3.2	1.8	2.6
<b>Cotton</b>	131779	276.7	2.1 (2.8 bales per hectare)	733.4
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	5730	45.8	8	18.3
<b>Asparagus</b>	218	0.3	1.5	0.7
<b>Other</b>	473			12.9
<b>Total</b>	185482			901.2

## 1961-1962

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	42976	108	2.513	2118.8
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>				
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	100	0.7	7	2.4
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	129768	364	2.805 (3.7 bales per hectare)	790.7
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	4500	27	6	10.5
<b>Asparagus</b>	218	0.7	3.014	5.3
<b>Other</b>	60	0.2	2.688	0.1
<b>Total</b>	177642			927.3

## 1962-1963

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	42480	134.6	3.169	148.1
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>				
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	104	0.7	7	2.5
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	127412	373.4	2.931 (3.9 bales per hectare)	811
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	5050	30.3	6	11.8
<b>Asparagus</b>	227	0.7	3	5.5
<b>Other</b>				
<b>Total</b>	175273			978.9

## 1963-1964

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	51836	167.64	3.234	184.4
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>				
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	44	0.308	7	1.06
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	126250	377.42	2.989 (3.9 bales per hectare)	819.76
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	5012	30.072	6	11.73
<b>Asparagus</b>	175	0.515	3	4.2
<b>Other</b>				
<b>Total</b>	193317			1021.15

## 1964-1965

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	51882	165.525	3.19	190.42
<b>Safflower</b>				
<b>Barley</b>	730	2.336	3.2	2.48
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	57	0.399	7	1.38
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	120.927	398.056	3.292 (4.4 bales per hectare)	876.14
<b>Sorghum</b>				
<b>Alfalfa</b>	4375	26.25	6	9.19
<b>Asparagus</b>	213	639	35.1	
<b>Other</b>				
<b>Total</b>	178814			1074.72

## 1965-1966

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	35719	114	3.186	104.08
<b>Safflower</b>	2706	4.371	1.615	6.56
<b>Barley</b>	5.1	14.559	2.855	13.83
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	52	0.364	7	1.26
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	125089	406.709	3.251 (4.3 bales per hectare)	895.17
<b>Sorghum</b>	1179	4.716	4	3.07
<b>Alfalfa</b>				
<b>Asparagus</b>	6300	37.8	6	13.23
<b>Other</b>	319	0.957	3	7.66
<b>Total</b>	176524			1044.86

## 1966-1967

<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	39901	121.312	3.04	110.76
<b>Safflower</b>	4119	6.099	1.481	9.15
<b>Barley</b>	3395	7	2.062	6.65
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	58	0.406	7	1.4
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	120777	248.707	2.142 (2.9 bales per hectare)	667.46
<b>Sorghum</b>	571	2.284	4	1.48
<b>Alfalfa</b>	7547	45.282	6	19.24
<b>Asparagus</b>				
<b>Other</b>	651			
<b>Total</b>	177019			816.14

## 1967-1968

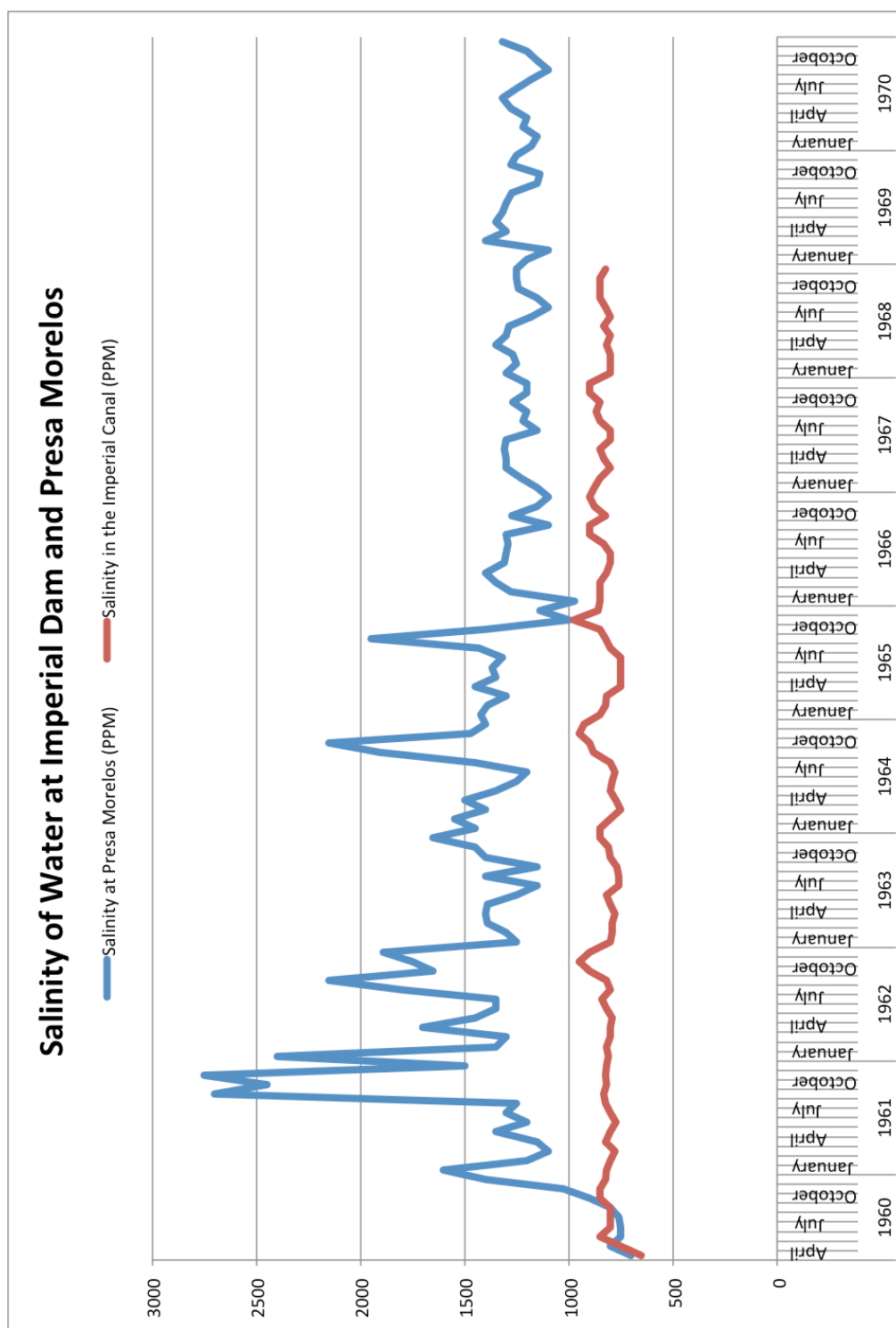
<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	60491	167.667	2.772	153.08
<b>Safflower</b>	8692	14.185	1.632	21.27
<b>Barley</b>	4083	10.039	2.459	9.54
<b>Oats</b>	395	0.386	3.5	0.35
<b>Garlic</b>	181	1.267	7	4.37
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	88709	245.206	2.764 (3.7 bales per hectare)	637.29
<b>Sorghum</b>	2402	7.206	3	5.04
<b>Alfalfa</b>	8664	103.968	12	46.79
<b>Asparagus</b>	409	1.227	3	9.82
<b>Other</b>	3153			7.89
<b>Total</b>	177181			895.44

## 1968-1969

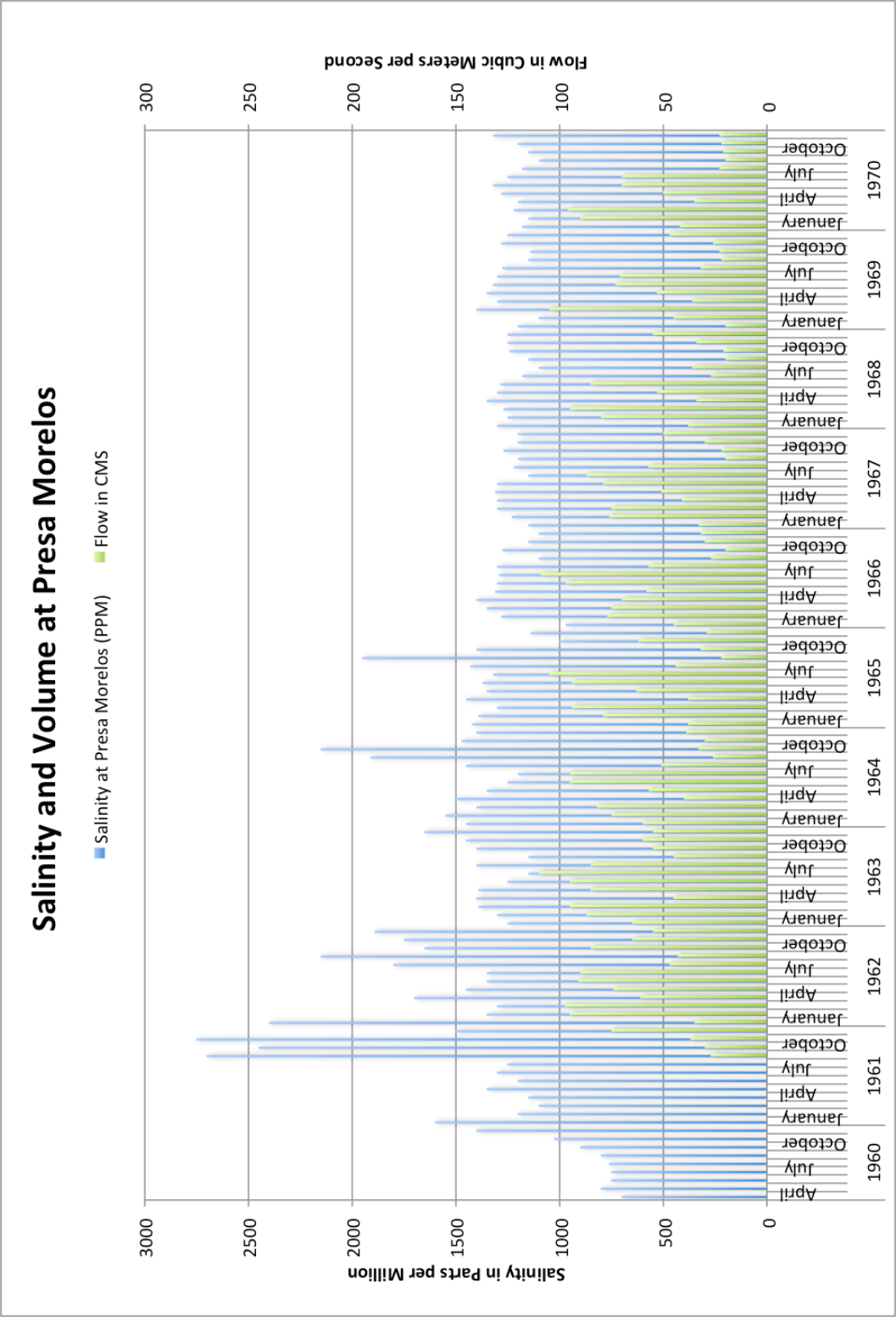
<b>Crop</b>	<b>Area planted, Ha</b>	<b>Production (Thousands of Tons)</b>	<b>Tons per Hectare</b>	<b>Crop Value (Millions of Pesos)</b>
<b>Wheat</b>	44273	147.983	3.342	135.11
<b>Safflower</b>	29033	36.189	1.246	60.07
<b>Barley</b>	5841	15.579	2.567	14.8
<b>Oats</b>				
<b>Garlic</b>	152	1.064	7	3.67
<b>Corn</b>				
<b>Cotton</b>	76651	149.469	1.950 (2.6 bales per hectare)	373.67
<b>Sorghum</b>	1340	4.02	3	2.81
<b>Alfalfa</b>	2193	150.192	12	63.83
<b>Asparagus</b>	12516	972	3	7.78
<b>Other</b>	3852			9.63
<b>Total</b>	173982			671.37

## Appendix II

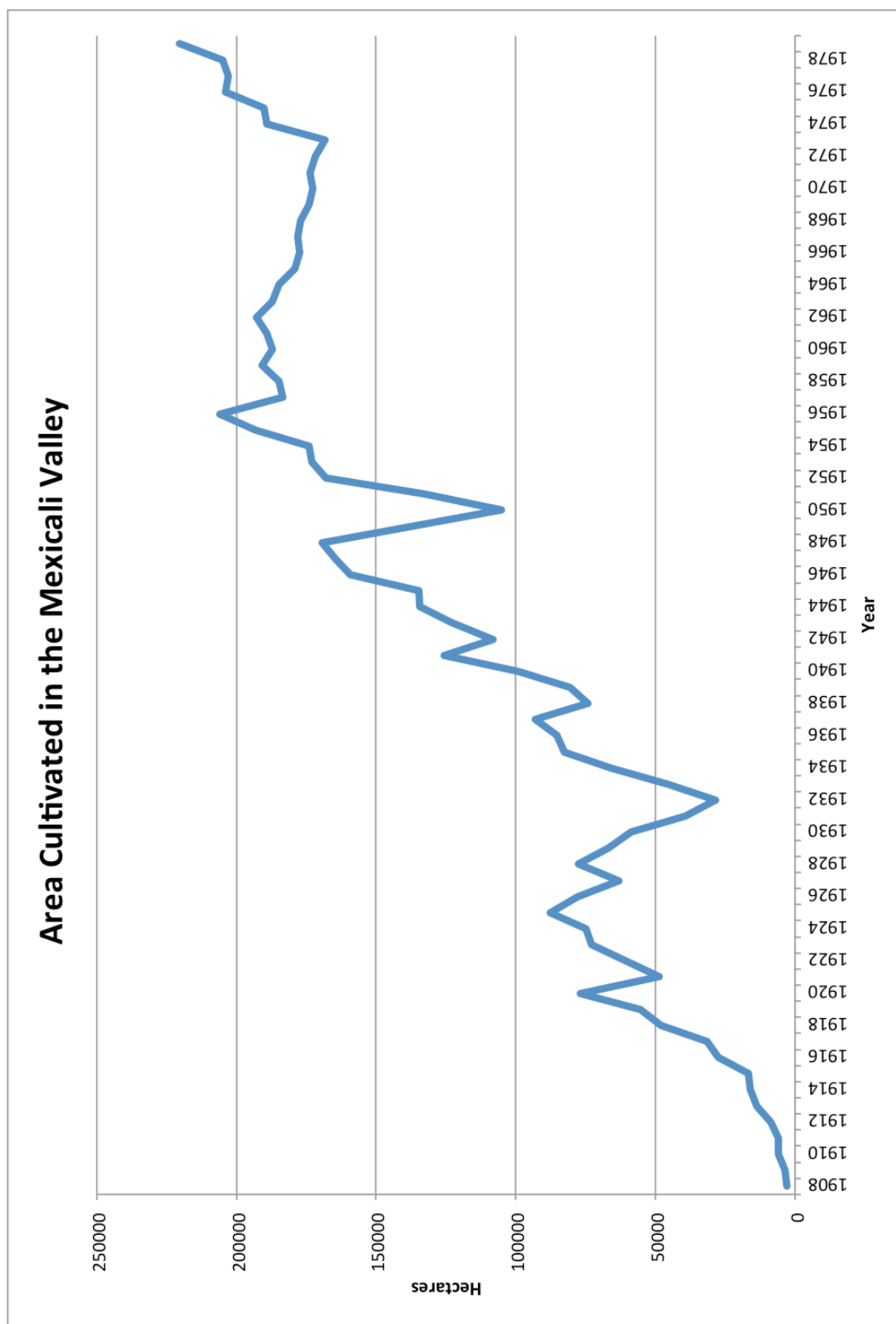
### Salinity of Water at Imperial Dam and Presa Morelos



**Appendix III**  
**Salinity and Volume at Presa Morelos**



**Appendix IV**  
**Cultivated Area in the Mexicali Valley**





### Archives

#### Mexicali:

Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California

Archivo Histórico del Municipio de Mexicali

Instituto de Investigaciones Culturales, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

#### México, D.F.:

Archivo General de la Nación

Archivo Histórico del Agua

Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores

Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada

Hémeroteca Nacional

#### United States:

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library

National Archives Online Collections, Nixon Presidential Materials

National Security Archive, George Washington University

Western Waters Digital Collection, University of Arizona

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