



“I Understand Your People”

Two Republican visions on Mexican immigration and the political future of the United States

By Fredo Arias-King

The battle lines evident between Republicans debating how to respond to the immigration reforms proposed by President Obama are not new. They were already apparent, albeit lower-key, 13 years ago to a Mexican delegation (which included this author) sent to discuss, among other topics, the issue of immigration with top U.S. officials, including 80 members of Congress.

The findings of these meetings as they pertain to the opinion of these legislators on the immigration and amnesty issues were elaborated in two CIS *Backgrounders* by this author. (See [“Politics by Other Means: The ‘Why’ of Immigration to the United States”](#), December 2003, and [“Immigration and Usurpation: Elites, Power, and the People’s Will”](#), July 2006.)

This paper narrows the issue to two discernible trends in the Republican establishment, and assigns specific political actors to exemplify these two trends. Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) represents the “polite skeptics”, while then-Florida Governor Jeb Bush represents the “embracers”. This is, of course, a simplification, like any typology. What’s more, over a decade has passed since the meetings that formed these impressions. Nevertheless, these two tendencies remain strong among Republican officials and identifying them may help readers understand the divide within that party over the current debate on immigration.

The 14 official missions to Washington, plus both party conventions, included a small but stable group of emissaries sent by the PAN, Mexico’s longtime opposition party that in the middle of those visits unexpectedly won the Mexican presidential election in July 2000. The core emissaries that participated in every mission were Dr. Carlos Salazar, director of international relations of the PAN; Anne V. Smith, the PAN’s special representative in Washington; and myself, as senior advisor on international relations to the PAN. One special emissary that joined after the election in two Washington trips plus the Republican National Convention was the recently elected Sen. Fernando Margáin, who was to become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Mexican Senate. Naturally, the debonair Margáin was the lead spokesman of our group in all the meetings where he participated.

Trend One: Senator Sessions, the Polite Skeptic

Our delegation met with Sen. Sessions on February 28, 2001, at his offices on Capitol Hill. The senator conversed amicably with all present, but especially with Sen. Margáin.

Because his private position during that meeting is evidently congruent with his public views on immigration (and other issues discussed that day), revealing these publicly should not be considered a breach of trust.

Fredo Arias-King from March 1999 to July 2000 was an aide to presidential candidate Vicente Fox of Mexico, largely handling the foreign relations of the campaign along with Dr. Carlos Salazar, who handled the foreign relations of Fox’s party, the PAN. After the July 2000 victory, Arias-King declined government jobs, but agreed to represent the PAN at both the Republican and the Democratic national conventions and some additional Washington meetings as well. In 14 trips to Washington and to both party conventions, he spoke extensively to U.S. public figures, including 80 members of Congress, about the bilateral relationship. A Harvard MBA and Sovietologist, his academic work focuses on the post-communist transitions, and he is the founder of Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, published in Washington since 1992.

For most of the meeting, Sessions discussed the narcotics issue, and not only from the point of American enforcement (such as recalling his prior work as a prosecutor), but, almost prophetically, on the damage wrought on Mexico itself: “Mexico needs to recognize that drugs pose a threat to democracy [and] undermine Mexican institutions.” Seemingly presaging the drug wars of 2006, Sessions asked, “How can Colombia fight drugs if they can’t control their country?” Far from the accusatory tone of other U.S. politicians, Sessions instead recognized this was a shared problem, with American consumption driving demand, and for the need of the United States “to be a good partner, not boss”. He mentioned that he was chairing the upcoming Mexico-United States Inter-Parliamentary meeting.



As a postscript to the meeting, after the photo-op with Sessions (left), Margáin (right) brought up the immigration issue, and specifically what chances there were for a special amnesty for Mexican illegal migrants.

Sessions, without a hint of discomfort, politely enumerated his reasons why amnesty was not an issue he supported. We recall that he spoke about three issues. The first was the millions of foreign aspirants following the law and waiting for years in their countries to gain work permits for the United States. He spoke of a Filipino family whose story he was familiar with on a personal level. His second argument was economic, on competition between migrant labor and low-income domestic (Alabama) workers. Third, a political argument surfaced briefly in that what is driving the pro-immigration debate, even among Republicans, was mostly catering to special interests.

The senator’s line of thinking was echoed by another four Republican legislators we met with — David Dreier (Calif.), Christopher Cox (Calif.), and Phil Gramm (Texas), plus an unknown legislator at the Republican convention.

Dreier sat alone in a large congressional meeting room with Dr. Salazar and myself. He had a striking knowledge of Mexican politics and basically was there to listen to us answer his precise and academic questions. Toward the end, he did mention his skepticism of Mexican proposals for increased immigration and amnesty, but his unusual take was that this would not be good for Mexico. He spoke about two mechanisms coloring this opinion. First was the issue of the brain drain, and he cited a study that found (if I understood correctly) that migrants tend to be the most promising in the respective communities and social strata from which they originate. Second was the issue of “moral hazard”, in that Mexican politicians expect endless concessions from the United States and therefore put off passing needed reforms and policies that would benefit Mexicans in Mexico.

Cox was not as elaborate with our delegation on the immigration issue as his fellow California congressman Dreier, but instead nodded uncomfortably when the argument surfaced that Mexican migrants were a huge boon to the U.S. economy or other such talking points the Mexican delegation was sent to discuss. “I beg to differ” was the most he would comment on the issue, before steering the conversation in other, less polemic, directions.

In stark contrast, Sen. Gramm (center,) spent well over half an hour just on this topic in his spacious offices that March 1, 2001. Candidly speaking about several Mexican and U.S. political pathologies, he viewed mass Mexican immigration as the privilege of special-interest “militant” groups spending public money for private gain. These groups, “that don’t want to pay competitive wages ... grant citizenship as a prize, because it is a freebie for them.”

After criticizing the Congressional Hispanic Caucus as really a “liberal Democrat caucus” (mentioning a Republican Hispanic colleague named Bonilla who refused to participate in it for that reason), he ripped into them for believing “in bringing as many Mexicans here and the argument is that all Mexicans would like to leave Mexico.”



The senator had a humane plan of his own, however. He said he was working with another two legislators, Pete Domenici (D-N.M.) and Zell Miller (D) from Georgia as well as the Bush White House, on a new guest-worker program for Mexicans to work in the United States, but then return home with their money and skills — “no different than having students over”. “Nobody benefits from the current program,” he regretted.

Trend Two: Governor Jeb Bush, the Embracer

Our delegation was very well received at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. Fresh from winning a historic upset, Vicente Fox and his party were hot topics among the delegates. At a special gathering of the foreign like-minded dignitaries, the master of ceremonies, then UK Conservative leader William Hague, gave ample time to Dr. Salazar and myself to speak in detail to the delegates about what they could learn from the PAN’s victory in Mexico.

There was much enthusiasm among the American guests as well, but also some unease.

That April, in the thick of the Mexican election, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, with a family history of personal friendship with PRI officials, had tacitly endorsed the ruling party’s candidate, despite repeated protests from the Fox campaign. After Fox’s victory that July, the president-elect forced George Bush to call several times before taking his congratulatory call. This incident, I have argued elsewhere, presaged the poor relations between both men, even if it went largely unnoticed at the time.

Some Republican officials at the convention were aware of this unease and went out of their way to make amends.

The Florida secretary of state, Katherine Harris, and her deputy, Patricio Lombardi, were very solicitous to the Mexican delegation, to the point of personally intervening on several occasions to facilitate meetings with top U.S. and campaign officials present at that convention.



One such contact was their boss, Governor Jeb Bush (right), brother of the Republican presidential candidate. Incidentally, Jeb Bush had also publicly met on a few occasions with delegations from the PRI candidate, but had refused to meet with our emissaries during the Mexican election.

Jeb Bush seemed to be aware of the unease surrounding his and his brother’s meddling in the Mexican election in favor of the PRI and against then-candidate (now president-elect) Fox, which is perhaps why he was unusually solicitous at the impromptu meeting arranged in the hallways of the convention center with our delegation.

Because this meeting was held in a public place, and the conversation was within earshot of any passersby, the recollections are not bound by confidentiality.

Jeb Bush seemed jittery while speaking to our delegation for longer than we had expected (around 10 minutes), mostly avoiding eye contact with Sen. Margáin (his main interlocutor). He hardly allowed our delegation to share impressions, but instead rambled on several topics he thought would be of interest to us.

One such topic was Mexican migrants. Without the Mexican senator bringing up the subject, Jeb Bush talked about his record in Florida with Hispanic migrants in general and Mexican ones in particular. He was aware that naturalized Mexicans do not vote the same way as Cuban-Americans, but seemed convinced that there was a formula to turn these Mexican-Americans into a solid Republican constituency. He cited the example of Democrat voters in northern Florida becoming solid Republicans decades earlier.

What was curious is how statist this “formula” was. He spoke of several concessions, subsidies, scholarships, and other government programs that could be targeted specifically to Mexican-Americans in his state (and by implication elsewhere), to create a new a Republican constituency. He also spoke of broad immigration reform to assuage Mexican-American voters —

perhaps believing that amnesty and increased immigration was a decisive priority for them, enough to change their voting pattern. He seemed to believe that once he found that (statist) formula, Mexican-Americans could be captured as a block for the foreseeable future.

He peppered his remarks with references to his family ties with Mexico, repeatedly bringing up his Mexican wife as an example of values, honesty, warmth, and other virtues he seemed to associate with all Mexicans. "I understand your people," he assured us more than once.

Jeb Bush was not alone. In fact, most of the Republican legislators (and other officials) we met with that had a specific opinion on the issue of Mexican immigration and amnesty had more in common with Jeb Bush than with Sen. Sessions.