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## 'Opening Mexico': Distant Neighbor \*

### The New York Times

March 28, 2004

By Michele Wucker \*\*

When the Aztec earth mother Coatlicue told her 401 children -- the stars and moon -- that she was pregnant with the sun, they cut off her head in a jealous rage to keep their brother from being born. The Aztec sun god Huitzilopochtli emerged nevertheless, fully grown at birth, armor clad and vengeful. He decapitated the moon, banishing her head and the stars to the night sky.

"Opening Mexico," Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon's sweeping account of a nation's struggle for democracy, takes this tale as emblematic of power in Mexico, "of jealous violence countered by vengeance; of mob insurrection quelled by the ascent of a single awesome ruler, more feared than loved." Herein lies the deepest challenge to the opening of Mexico to political and economic change: the fear that without an authoritarian leader, an unruly populace will destroy the nation.

This fear explains the grip that the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, held over Mexico for seven decades of essentially one-party rule. The party was created in 1929 after two decades of chaos prompted by the overthrow of the dictator Porfirio Diaz and the failed presidency of the gentle Francisco Madero. In his quixotic attempt at democracy, Madero made the fatal error of failing to shoot his enemies before they shot him.

"Opening Mexico" is equal in ambition and scope to "Distant Neighbors," the monumental 1985 account by Alan Riding, like Preston and Dillon a former Mexico correspondent for The New York Times. Riding wrote in broad strokes, organizing his material thematically. By contrast, Preston and Dillon have filled in the spaces with the raw, vibrant details of the lives of contemporary Mexicans. At times, readers might wish for a bit -- though not too much -- more analytical elaboration of the type that Riding doled out so generously. Yet Preston and Dillon more than make up for this minor shortcoming with their classic, nuanced storytelling.

Indeed, the difference in styles mirrors the times: Riding described the Miguel de la Madrid administration, when Mexico still seemed unable to break out of a closed system. Preston and Dillon have taken on a Mexico bursting at the seams, where many previously hidden realities are now out in the open.

In 2000, Mexicans elected Vicente Fox by a landslide, kicking out the PRI. This extraordinary event took place as Latin America was losing faith in democracy. According to the Chilean research firm Latinobarometro, the number of Latin Americans believing that democracy is the best form of government fell from over 60 percent in the late 1990's to just 48 percent in 2001. Mexico was one of the few countries where support for democracy rose.

The stakes were high for Fox, an outspoken former Coca-Cola executive from the National Action Party, or PAN. So were expectations, despite the odds: the new president faced entrenched corruption, a bureaucracy filled with PRI stalwarts, a justice system undermined by drug traffickers and institutions so dependent on the PRI that the lower legislative house had no procedures for apportioning committees when the PRI did not hold a majority.

Given these obstacles, Mexicans soon became disillusioned with their new government. A recent Latinobarometro poll has shown that more Mexicans approved of their "democracy" in 1996 -- under the PRI -- than in 2003. By Preston and Dillon's account of how Mexico got here, any other result would have been a surprise, for the biggest obstacle to a democratic future for Mexico remains its authoritarian past. The authors cite the Mexican intellectual Carlos Fuentes, who has said that the present is merely the accumulation of frustrated goals of the past: "There is no single time: all of our times are alive, all of our pasts are present."

Perhaps Mexico's most powerful collective memory is of the Oct. 2, 1968, massacre, when government troops fired on a crowd of citizens protesting the policies of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz. The massacre took place, fittingly, at a plaza commemorating the Tlatelolco battle in which the Spanish conquistadores defeated the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtemoc. Preston and Dillon are particularly good at showing how the events of Tlatelolco became a living presence in Mexico's struggle for democracy over the following three decades.

Aztec mythology held that the world was created and destroyed four times before its current incarnation, which an earthquake would destroy in turn. In a sense, the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City did destroy a world -- that of a government many Mexicans believed could never be cracked open. The quake literally uncovered evidence of Mexico's repressive past, seven corpses that medical examiners found to have been tortured. Buildings near the 1968 massacre site trembled, and when one of them collapsed, neighborhood residents created a citywide citizens' movement to protest the government's failure to help them.

Similar movements brought about change on a larger scale. In 1988, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas -- named for the last Aztec king and the son of the ruling party's first leader -- embodied the opposition's hopes in the closest presidential election ever. When the PRI declared its candidate the winner after huge

and obvious fraud, Cardenas responded with calm rather than violence. His decision, as Preston and Dillon show, would play a pivotal role in breaking a cycle of destruction and despair.

President Carlos Salinas liberalized the economy and made gestures toward political opening. Yet he relied unabashedly on autocratic methods that eventually destroyed his legacy. When opposition parties amassed evidence of fraud in state elections, for example, Salinas appointed "compromise" candidates, pretending to support democracy while handpicking 60 percent of Mexico's governors.

In 1994, the presidency passed to the PRI technocrat Ernesto Zedillo. He courageously set about to reform Mexico, despite growing opposition from the party dinosaurs who mocked him as a weakling. Zedillo's first challenge -- a hangover from Salinas -- was an economic crisis; foreign reserves were fleeing the country, which forced him to make a humiliating devaluation. He then arrested his own drug czar, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, for colluding with narcotraffickers, just nine weeks after the United States' antidrug chief had heralded Gutierrez as "a guy of unquestioned integrity."

Preston and Dillon give Zedillo ample and well-deserved credit for being the architect of many of the political reforms that led to the dramatic opening that swept Fox into power. Yet their portrait of the mild-mannered, Clark Kentish president is oddly contradictory -- or not so oddly, considering that one of Latin America's enduring mysteries is its ability to accommodate opposing realities simultaneously. "Zedillo, in his self-imposed remove, had little understanding of how dysfunctional the PRI system had become," they write, even as they document his herculean efforts to change it. They take him to task for being a reformer of institutions, not of individuals, even as they present the struggles of many courageous individuals inside and outside the government who pushed to change the institutions.

Indeed, Preston and Dillon's central explanation of why Mexico finally cracked open lies in the momentum created by such individuals, both mighty and meek, who took on a system that was decaying from within. And this is where "Opening Mexico" truly shines.

Intellectuals -- Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Hector Aguilar Camin, Enrique Krauze -- repeatedly called for reform. Josefina Ricano, the wife of a wealthy businessman whose son was kidnapped and murdered, channeled her grief and rage into a citizens movement that in 1997 united Mexicans across class and color lines to protest crime. On the border, the labor leader Julia Quinonez fought for the rights of workers in American-owned factories. In 1999, the grandson of a general involved in the Tlatelolco massacre agreed to publish his late grandfather's memoirs uncovering the truth.

These stories are Mexico's present and future. For if there is despair in a long history of tragedy, there is also great reason for hope in the lives of the many Mexicans chronicled here who have uncovered secrets and forced change, defying the legend of Huitzilopochtli.

\* *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy.* By Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon. Illustrated. 594 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$30.

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**Mexico-U.S Border Program**  
of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)



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