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Essay

US-Mexico relations are officially off-the-wall

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Last week, in the *New York Times*, renowned Mexican historian Enrique Krauze splendidly summed up the US conduct toward his country. Mexico. 'The United States has been a difficult neighbour, sometimes violent, almost always arrogant, almost never respectful, rarely cooperative,' Krauze wrote. Donald Trump is the embodiment of all these.

Trump has taken the US disrespect towards its Spanish-speaking neighbour to a level even Mexicans – a resigned bunch – won't put up with any longer. Trump and Mexico's president Enrique Peña Nieto were due to meet on 31 January in Washington to re-negotiate the 1994 Free Trade Agreement. The meeting is now off after Trump told Peña Nieto not to bother coming if he was not willing to pay for what he called 'the much needed wall'.

Ironically the Free Trade Agreement – that Trump and Peña Nieto were to discuss – was signed the same year the original wall, an assortment of rusting metallic bars and dodgy fences, was erected. Rather than a wall, it is a patchy fence of approximately 1100 km along the 3200 km that separates Mexico and the US. Bill Clinton built it in 1994.

Clinton's fence didn't reduce the numbers of migrants. What really happened was rather tragic – the number of dead migrants increased. Mexicans, and many others trying to reach the US, were forced to seek new and more risky crossings through the mountains and desert. In the last 20 years 8000 have died in their attempts to enter the US.

The wall Trump promised to build – with a 20 percent tax on all imports coming from Mexico – comes at a time when the level of migration from Mexico to the US is at an all-time low. Currently there are more Mexicans leaving the US than entering it. Between 2009 and 2014 one million departed and 800,000 arrived.

In this context one could argue that the wall Trump wants to build is just a symbol, designed to humiliate Mexicans and construe them as a threat to the US social tissue. 'Trump has a tower and now he wants a wall to demonstrate how *machito* he is,' Lucia told me over the phone. She is an old Mexican friend who has lived in Los Angeles for more than two decades. 'The wall has not only unleashed the fury of the Mexican left, historically anti-US and nationalist; it has also angered the right.'

Lucia is undocumented, and is concerned about the wall and what will happen to her under Trump. 'Los gringos want to expel us,' Lucia said. 'Perhaps it's time to pack up and head back.' She described herself as one of the 'survivors' of Barack Obama's mass deportation. Obama deported more people than any other US president; 2.5 million during his eight years in office. 'Perhaps under Trump my deportation orders are written on the wall,' Lucia said.

She is pleased, however, that since Trump began with his threatening talk, the 50 Mexican consulates in the US have become genuine legal and social sanctuaries to her and to those who fear deportation. Lucia is one of the approximately 55.2 million Latin Americans living in the US, 63 percent of whom are Mexicans.

Mass deportation is high on Trump's agenda. This would be cataclysmic to a society that depends heavily on the remittances Mexicans working in the US send across the border. It is estimated that annually Mexicans send home US\$2362 million.

In Mexico, Trump has outraged just about everyone. Former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda said Trump's executive order to build a border wall was a 'slap in the face' and for Ángeles Mastretta, one of the country's best known writers, it was an 'affront'.

The wall has also united Mexicans. One of its leading figures, the conservative and former President Vicente Fox, asked Peña Nieto to give 'zero concessions' to Washington. And he expressed rather clearly what he thought of Trump's demands for Mexico to pay for the construction of the wall: 'We're not paying for the fucking wall,' he tweeted.

The wall – which according to the *Washington Post* will cost US\$25 billion, and not the US\$12 billion Trump has mentioned – has prompted Mexicans to come up with original ways to deal with it. At the moment, one of the most popular acts of response – or resistance – is to submit via Twitter ideas for graffiti that can be scribbled on Trump's prospective wall.

'If the wall is made up of the same concrete that covers your heart it will be bloody hard to run through it,' was the rather starry-eyed suggestion from @GabyyzgmaliK.

Look after this wall, neither write on it nor mistreat it, it is yours,' was the suggestion from @Lalitopoketrain. The suggestion from @el_carlosvilla was short and sharp: 'Made in Mexico.'

Krauze reminded us that despite the fact the US has not been a good neighbour to Mexico, these two countries have lived side by side for almost 200 years in a 'generally peaceful atmosphere'. This peaceful atmosphere is now at risk. An era of unknown hostility between Mexico and the US has just begun.

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