

Fanning the Flames

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There are three precepts that no government can ignore: first, there is no alternative but to deal with the person who is the President of the United States of America. We can like it or not, but the superpower exerts an impact out of all proportion on the world and more so on Mexico. In addition, there is nothing that can be done about the matter. The geographic as well as the political, social, economic and geopolitical reality imposes itself above any other consideration. Second, the function of governing depends wholly on the confidence that the government is able to inspire on the part of the citizenry, a phenomenon that is magnified dramatically in this era of social networks. When the European Union was negotiating with Greece a couple of years ago, the head of the euro group said it categorically: “Truth comes on foot, and leaves on horseback.” Finally, the third precept is that it is better to keep the expectations of the population meager, because if everything comes out well the success is enormous, but if it comes out poorly no one will be let down. Alexander Pope, the great English poet of the XVIII century stated this eloquently: “Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”

During these past months, and in crescendo since Trump was anointed as the presidential candidate, the Mexican Government has been violating the three precepts one by one. Independently of the preferences of the population or the members of the current government, it has never known how to deal with today’s President Trump. The complaints and criticisms in the media and social networks are one thing, but quite another is the government itself, whose responsibility is enormous and cannot be delegated. In the graphics of the surveys of that electoral season it can be appreciated that every time ex-President Fox launched one of his cherry bombs, Trump’s stock went up. The same thing, but to a greater degree, occurred when the Mexican President gave the then-Candidate Trump the same treatment as a Head of State. Today it is clear that President Trump is not going to change or “moderate” his discourse. The key question is to what extent will the real limits of power (whether geopolitical, those stemming from the electoral structure of the US, particularly the Congress, and the system of checks and balances), contain his worst excesses. One of the White House officials when Nixon entered the U.S. Presidency told the journalists of the moment, “Watch what we do, not what we say.” What is said is immense and often intolerable; now we need to see what really is in store.

What is simply not part of the repertoire of President Enrique Peña Nieto and his team is communicating with the population. The government is not interested in informing, explaining or convincing. His conception of government is that of the PRI of before: command. The problem is that the latter is impossible –as the evolution of this administration has demonstrated- in the era of social networks, the so-called *commentocracy* and the ubiquity of information. Successful governments are those that inform and that attempt to lead the discussion so that the population comes to understand their rationale and, with luck, makes it its own. Decades ago, the

government could control the information that filtered down to the population, but today that is not possible: information not only arises from an infinity of sources –serious or not- but also, the citizenry itself can invent, add to or modify the information and disseminate it with the same swiftness and impact of any government. Trust is key for the functioning of a government, and to an even greater extent when this concerns a government anchored to institutions without the least strength or credibility. Despite this, the administration of President Peña is convinced that it knows more and knows it better than the entire population. In this regard, its recent response to one more failure in dealing with Trump’s government, that of recurring to a coarse nationalism, is pathetic: It’s easy to launch a nationalist tirade; thereafter nobody knows how to stop it or who’ll exploit it.

While it is difficult to govern in these times, what is inexplicable is for the government to fan the flame with no justification whatsoever or, worse yet, without sustenance. Inviting then-Candidate Trump was intrinsically reckless, demonstrating a profound ignorance of the way U.S. politics works or of the risks of that action for Mexico. But nothing explains what took place on January 23rd when the President and his Secretary practically volunteered that they had already solved “the problem.” The following days revealed that the strategy had not changed and that the disposition to incur in huge risks was still alive and well. All governments commit errors: that is an inevitable part of the function; what is inexplicable is the need to fan the flames of expectations, and still worse, when the risks that the society as a whole perceives are extreme.

“Things are not ripe,” affirms a popular saying. The challenge that the new U.S. administration poses is powerful and risky in itself; to this one must add the process of presidential succession here in Mexico, which is at its height, thus everyone is trying to beat a dead horse. There is no reason to rush into a negotiation for which the counterpart is not ready or willing. The Mexican government should be creating conditions so that success can be attained once the other side has exhausted its agenda on other topics and negotiating becomes feasible.

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