Like their ancestors before them, South Mexico's Indians are noted for their fine weaving.

The Five Nations of Mexico

Regional dynamics have set America's southern neighbor on a collision course with itself

Louis B. Casagrande
If you ask your friends to name five different locations in Mexico, you'll likely hear the names of some larger cities and beach resorts: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Acapulco, and Cancún. Ask them about current events in Mexico, and you'll probably hear about Mexico's huge foreign debt and drugs. Ask them to free-associate with "Mexico," and you'll probably be told, "Don't drink the water," "Tacos and enchiladas," "Rampant poverty," or "Fernando Valenzuela."

What you will not hear from most people is any considered analysis of what Mexico is today. But this is not surprising. Our interest in Mexico has rarely been consistent or profound. Americans took an interest in Mexico during the Mexican-American War of 1846-47, when a U.S. victory led to the acquisition of nearly half of Mexico's territory. They also took notice when Mexico erupted in revolution between 1910 and 1917, and Pancho Villa raided New Mexico. For the greater part of our history, though, Mexico has been a mysterious neighbor whose Spanish and Indian roots have presented an unfathomable contrast to our own Anglo-European traditions.

But no longer can Americans ignore Mexico. With a population of 80 million, Mexico is nearly four times larger than Canada. Half of the Mexican population is under the age of 19, compared to a U.S. median age of 31. Moreover, a whole range of complex issues—from illegal migration and drug trafficking to Mexico's foreign debt and the debate over Central America—demands that we pay more attention to Mexico, that we begin to penetrate the mystique of our "distant neighbor." Many American leaders now say that improving our relations with Mexico has become a major challenge, second in importance only to our dealings with the Soviet Union.

Yet how should we perceive Mexico? Should we merely define it as 31 states south of the Rio Grande? Should we simply memorize Mexico's topography, climate, economy, and ethnic groups? Absolutely not.

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**The Five Nations of Mexico**

- Mexamerica
- New Spain
- Metromex
- South Mexico
- Club Mex
These antiquated constructs may actually do us more harm than good, because they focus on a Mexico that no longer exists. To understand modern Mexico, we need a more sophisticated view of our southern neighbor—a view that acknowledges the country's increasingly diverse cultural, political, and economic geographies. Just as writers and scholars have recognized profound regional differences in the United States and Canada, we need to define and analyze the regional differences and dynamics that make up Mexico today.

Far from being an undifferentiated nation with a monolithic culture, Mexico is actually a federation of five distinct nations, each with its own boundaries and major cities, each with its own goals and priorities. Covering all of current Mexico and spilling over into contiguous parts of the U.S., Guatemala, and Belize, these five nations are: Metromex, greater Mexico City, the most powerful nation of the federation; Mexicoamerica, the progressive northern nation that straddles the U.S.-Mexican border; South Mexico, the predominantly Indian nation, resistant to change; New Spain, the densely populated, colonial heartland of the federation; and Club Mex, a constellation of resort enclaves that dot both coasts. By highlighting the differences among these five nations, we can begin to shed our simplistic images of Mexico in favor of a more complex and revealing portrait of our long-neglected southern neighbor.

**Metromex**

With a population over 18 million, Metromex consumes the entire Valley of Mexico, encompassing the Federal District and the surrounding 45 municipalities of the state of Mexico as well as the industrial corridors northwest to Queretaro, northeast to Pachuca, east to Puebla, and south to Cuernavaca. Before the Spanish Conquest, a great, shallow lake made the Valley of Mexico one of the richest in the world. Now, the dried-up bed of Lake Texcoco provides the dust that mingles with the smoke of 100,000 factories and the exhaust of nearly 3 million vehicles, creating one of the most toxic environments known.

Smog has not yet diminished the primacy of Metromex. One-half of all the industry of the Mexican Federation is located here. Metromex accounts for 38% of the GNP. The headquarters of government, banking, commerce, television, sports, and music are here, while the Basilica to the Virgin of Guadalupe, north of downtown Metromex, is the preeminent shrine of Mexican Catholicism. With such a concentration of economic, political, and cultural activity, it is not surprising that the population of Metromex has doubled in less than a decade, despite its unhealthy environment, or that nearly 3,000 immigrants arrive each day. By the latest count, almost one out of every four Mexicans calls the Metromex home. (An equivalent single metropolis in the United States would have 48 million residents, roughly the population of the Boston-Washington megalopolis on the East Coast.)

Metromex society reflects the consequences of unequal growth. The rich live in fashionable suburbs, shop at the most exclusive French and Italian shops, have private satellite dishes, and participate in a cosmopolitan lifestyle equal to the high life of New York, Paris, or Rome. The middle classes have also fared well. The 2 to 3 million government employees, business people, and unionized workers have been the key supporters and beneficiaries of the ruling political party, PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), in...
power continuously since 1929. With salaries often supplemented by graft and corruption, the Metromex middle classes exemplify the economic security and consumerism to which the lower classes aspire.

While the upper and middle classes are small and privileged, the base of the social pyramid remains huge and immobile. It has been estimated that over 50% of the Metromex poor live without running water in their one-room homes. About 40% lack access to health care. Nearly 25% do not have enough to eat. Providing for the poor presents a monumental problem for Metromex managers, but the poor continue to arrive, and the middle class recently has begun to question if Metromex can survive.

But Metromex does survive mainly because it continues to draw on the allegiance and resources of its neighboring nations. It extracts minerals, chemicals, steel, beef, and fuel from Mexamerica. From New Spain comes grain, vegetables, workers, and water. It receives hydroelectric power, coffee, tropical foodstuffs, more workers, and fuel from South Mexico, and Club Mex provides dollars to pay its international debt. Thus, Metromex is the voracious metropolis of a colonial empire. It justifies its political and economic power by citing the precedent of the Aztecs and by evoking the nationalistic ideals of independence and the Mexican revolution.

Mexamerica

Mexamerica is the great rival to Metromex. Straddling the U.S.-Mexican border, Mexamerica has a population of nearly 38 million, less than 3% of which is Indian. The northern boundary of Mexamerica runs from East Los Angeles up through the San Joaquin Valley, then south and east to Santa Fe and across central Texas through the cities of Austin and Houston. The southern boundary runs from the Pacific coast, south of Mazatlán, east to the cities of San Luis Potosí and Tampico. The interior of Mexamerica features little water and great desert expanses broken by rugged mountains. Within this sparsely settled land are the booming, modern industrial cities of El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, San Antonio, Chihuahua, and Monterrey.

Mexamerica historically has been beyond the full control of Metromex. The early ranchers and miners of the north were lords of fiefdoms never firmly under the central Colonial government, a pattern that continued throughout the politically unstable 19th and early 20th centuries. Isolated geographically and politically, the nortenos became independent and self-reliant, traits that still define the special character of this newly urbanized nation.

The independence of Mexamerica is most visible in its new middle class, who look not to Metromex but to the north for their role models. They speak with pochismos, a combination of Spanish and English (pushón equals “push,” troca means “truck”). They cheer for the Dallas Cowboys and Los Angeles Dodgers, they go to video night clubs, and they eat hamburgers and hot dogs as well as burritos and goat. Those who live south of the border now demand more political participation in the Mexican Federation, mainly through the more conservative PAN, the Partido de Acción Nacional. Middle-class Mexicans in the United States also seek greater influence. Mexican food, clothing, music, and architecture characterize much of the American Southwest, and increasing numbers of Mexican Americans have been elected to major political posts in California, New Mexico, and Texas.

The economy of Mexamerica is diversified and relatively strong. The U.S.-Mexican border, for instance, is
big business. Each year 6 to 8 million people—tourists, legal and illegal migrants, contrabandistas (smugglers), and industrial developers—pump billions of dollars into the border economy. Over the past decade, hundreds of U.S. businesses have crossed the border as part of the maquiladora, or in-bond industrialization program, which allows U.S. manufacturers to use cheap Mexican labor to assemble and export products made from imported, duty-free raw materials. Although a recent slide in the value of the Mexican peso has made the border less attractive, la frontera remains a critical source of economic and political power.

Commercial agriculture in western Mexamerica is also impressive. Along the coastal plains of Sonora and Sinaloa, huge irrigated farms, jointly owned by Mexican and U.S. corporations, use the latest in high-tech farm machinery to grow grains, vegetables, and cotton primarily for the American market. Further inland, over the Sierra Madre Occidental, the cattle and lumber industries have also been modernized, further stimulating the growth of commerce and finance throughout the region.

The northeast of Mexamerica is heavily industrialized. Monclova has one of the largest steel mills in all of Latin America, but Monterrey is the premier industrial city. Well known for their business acumen, the regiomontanos, as the people of Monterrey are called, have diversified from beer and steel to petrochemicals, packaging, building products, and banking. The regiomontanos have weathered various economic crises of the Mexican Federation and have recently completed a renovation of the downtown district that combines abstract sculptures with refurbished colonial facades.

With a growing awareness of its own potential, Mexamerica seeks ways to maintain and expand its economic development while absorbing migrants from its less-developed rural areas. Its future in the Mexican Federation is openly discussed, and it challenges the prerogatives and symbolism of Metromex as the traditional seat of power.

South Mexico

If Mexamerica is the progressive rival to Metromex, South Mexico is the relatively impoverished nation resistant to change. The northern border of South Mexico runs east from the Pacific coast, north of Acapulco, to the Gulf of Mexico, skirting south of the cities of Cuernavaca and Puebla. The southern border incorporates those portions of Guatemala and Belize that have been within the Mexican sphere of influence since colonial times. South Mexico has a population of about 15 million, half of which is Indian (Nahuat, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Maya), and most of which is poor.

Unlike Mexamerica, which has several large cities, South Mexico has only a few medium-sized cities. Oaxaca, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Villahermosa, and Mérida serve mainly as regional service centers, not as centers of intensive industrialization. The great majority of the population lives in small towns and villages or in scattered hamlets located in more inaccessible zones that range from high mountains to tropical lowlands.

The economy of South Mexico is predominantly agricultural, small-scale, and familial. Crafts are a major source of cash for many citizens of the south. The states of Oaxaca and Chiapas are well known for their pottery, textiles, and wooden toys. Guerrero has its mask making. The Yucatán produces henequen hammocks and Panama-style hats. Tour-
is a source of income because of the many pre-Hispanic ruins, picturesque villages, and native festivals. But tourist development, like industrial growth, requires capital that South Mexico does not have.

Rather than looking elsewhere for their role models, the natives of South Mexico look to the past and cling to their traditions. The Indian communities continue to eat corn tortillas and black beans and to wear huaraches and handwoven costumes, even though the modern substitutes are now within their economic reach. South Mexico is still governed by the old system of political bosses who control local opposition and deliver the votes for the PRI of Metromex. Even the Spanish spoken in the region tends to be slower and more conservative. Indian words and concepts pervade conversations in the flowered and sunlit plazas.

During the oil boom of the 1970s, South Mexico experienced a flurry of new projects and interest from Metromex. A small, cosmopolitan middle class began to challenge the provincial middle class that has controlled the region since the Conquest. With the collapse of the oil market in the early 1980s, however, most projects were abandoned. Now, Metromex mainly seeks to secure the southern border of the Mexican Federation against the pressures of illegal migration and contraband from Central America. South Mexico would like to exploit this concern to initiate independent development, but unlike Mexamerica, it lacks the real clout to seek self-control.

New Spain

With 30 million inhabitants, New Spain forms the densely populated, colonial center of "Old" Mexico. Unlike Mexamerica or South Mexico, New Spain features an elaborate web of large, medium-sized, and small cities, each with its own network of dependent villages. Most New Spain communities are centuries old, giving the region an unequaled stability. Crisscrossed by small mountain ranges and blessed with abundant water and arable valleys, New Spain has been the age-old breadbasket of the Mexican Federation. The large farms of the Bajío region grow wheat and corn. The farms around Morelia and Zamora produce a variety of fruits and vegetables. Thus New Spain has ample food to feed itself and still be the main provider to Metromex. In exchange for such provisions, Metromex offers New Spain industrial goods and favored status as a political protectorate. Unlike parts of Mexamerica, where political opposition has reached rebellious proportions, New Spain has remained faithful to the ruling PRI. No opposition party has ever won political control over a major city in the region.

Although New Spain acquiesces to the political and economic power of Metromex, it has strong cultural traditions. Residents of its dual capitals of Guadalajara in the west and Veracruz in the east have strong identities that date to the beginnings of the Colonial era. The tapatíos of Guadalajara are known for their conservative Spanish attitudes and for the tequila, mariachi music, and rodeos that have become symbols of the Mexican Federation as a whole. The jarochos of Veracruz have maintained a mixed Spanish Colonial and Black Caribbean heritage best expressed in their unparalleled pre-Lenten carnival. The few remaining Indian communities of New Spain, such as the Otomi and Tarascans, still practice their pre-Conquest crafts and customs.

But tradition alone does not solve problems. New Spain is overpopulated, undercapitalized, and gener-
While some stay at menial jobs, many of New Spain’s young men go north to find higher-paying work.

ally locked into an increasingly outdated agricultural economy. The young men of New Spain make up 80% of those who go al norte to search for work in Mexamerica or beyond. New Spain does not create enough capital to sustain its own industrial development, at least at a level to match its growing population or to rival Metromex. And the tradition of small-scale family farming cannot compete in the export market with the high-tech, high-yield commercial operations of Mexamerica.

Club Mex

Unlike the other nations of the Mexican Federation, whose histories are at least 400 years old, Club Mex is a new nation, consisting of converted port towns (Acapulco, Mazatlán, Manzanillo), once-sleepy fishing villages (Puerto Vallarta, Zihuatanejo, Puerto Escondido, and Cozumel), and brand-new, planned tourist centers (Cancún and Ixtapa). Despite the differing origins of its constituent parts, Club Mex is a nation in the same sense as the others because it reflects a coherent plan to create resort enclaves dedicated to tourists who bring millions of dollars in search of sun and relaxation. Through its various governmental agencies, Metromex has invested billions of dollars in Club Mex. Private developers, both national and international, also have invested heavily in the potential of this new nation. Las Hadas, a resort near Manzanillo made famous in the movie Ten, was built by a Bolivian millionaire. Sheraton International, Holiday Inn International, the Westin Hotels, and others have all built luxury accommodations in these major tourist destinations.

Club Mex’s population is about 1.5 million, not including the 2 million or so people who visit each year. Before Club Mex achieved international status in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its residents were mainly shopkeepers, fishermen, and craftsmen, with a minority directly involved in the fledgling tourist trade. After Club Mex took off, however, a new set of jobs and income levels was introduced, sometimes to the benefit of locals but mainly to the advantage of bilingual immigrants, many from Metromex, who were specially trained to meet the demands of international tourism.

Because Club Mex is the pet project of Metromex in collaboration with the international tourist industry, it is seen by the other nations as a serious competitor for scarce federal tax funds. During the building of Cancùn, for example, residents of South Mexico joked sarcastically that todo México es Cancùn (all of Mexico is [given] to Cancùn). They and others in Mexamerica and New Spain complained that a disproportionate amount of capital was going to the resort to the disadvantage of infrastructural projects in their respective domains.

While Club Mex is a competitor, it is also a market for the goods and services of the other Mexican nations. Mexamerica supplies building materials for the hotels and shop-
New Spain is home to the landscape thought of by Americans as “Mexican.”

...ning malls and most of the beer and wine for the resort restaurants. South Mexico has an outlet for its depressed craft industries in the new resort shops, and New Spain now sells some of its surplus food at premium prices. What is not known, however, is to what extent Club Mex produces capital for reinvestment in any of the other nations of the Mexican Federation, or to what extent new jobs are created relative to the massive initial costs of jetports, highways, water, and sewage systems.

Of much greater certainty is the fact that, for millions of foreigners, Club Mex now is the primary “Mexican” experience. How many Americans have been known to say, “Oh, I've been to Mexico. We spent a lovely week at Cancún”?

The five nations of Mexico present a complex arrangement of problems and possibilities far richer than any traditional view of Mexico as the land of burros and sombreros. Despite a common heritage as a New World colony, the five nations have significantly different histories, economies, and evolving identities. At the moment, they relate to each other as rivals, allies, or colonies held together by political necessity. However, their conflicting trajectories suggest that change is inevitable.

Some predict radical change. Metromex, for example, could collapse unto itself from the sheer weight of its own internal problems. Mexamerica would then become the center of economic and political power. New Spain would probably have to realign itself with the politically more conservative and northward-looking Mexamerica. South Mexico would most likely be ignored and grow poorer. In the chaos, Club Mex would go independent.

Others foresee a less dramatic future. Metromex could reach a new understanding with Mexamerica, based on a more democratic, two-party political system and a less nationalistic economic relationship with the United States. If this should happen, New Spain might fall behind, given its decreased political importance to Metromex. South Mexico would be developed more in line with the Mexamerican model of private capitalism, leaving the “backward” Indians on de facto reservations. And Club Mex would become an economic plum, possibly divided up between Mexamerican and Metromex entrepreneurs.

Whatever the outcome, people throughout North America will be affected; our futures are inextricably tied. Thus, it is to our mutual advantage to throw out the old maps we have of each other and begin to look anew at the regional realities that shape us. To do less would be unneighborly, if not unwise.

Further Reading
In many ways I found Louis B. Casagrande's "The Five Nations of Mexico" (Spring 1987), in which he cleverly borrows Joel Garreau's regional framework from The Nine Nations of North America, both fascinating and frustrating. It does seem worth questioning whether, as Casagrande claims, this use of "nations" to define regions offers a "more sophisticated" means of assessing a foreign culture region. The pedagogic advantage of the approach is perhaps easiest to appreciate. By generalizing large regional units as "nations," there is no need to know the 31 states of Mexico nor to comprehend their topography, climate, economy, and ethnic groups. Whole traditions and environments are lumped into convenient, if not completely satisfying, packages—a sort of fast-food regionalism. This technique may be helpful in painting a quick portrait for the old colonial hearth areas of "New Spain" and "Metromex," but it proves complicating and ultimately breaks down in what Casagrande calls "Mexamerica" and "Club Mex." The latter, a newly emerging nation according to the author, is a series of discontinuous units that by Casagrande's own admission are really colonies of Mexico City, as well as offshore enclaves for international investment and recreation. Since these subregions are relatively recent aberrations to the Mexican scene, their inclusion as a separate nation awaits the test of time.

A more disturbing regionalization is Mexamerica, an area that encompasses most of northern Mexico and parts of the American Southwest. While it is inviting and currently fashionable to consider lifeways and conditions as relatively similar on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border, closer inspection reveals that the two sides are sufficiently different to make such comparisons dubious. I recognize the argument that the border is simply an inconvenience—that cultural and economic influences flow freely in both directions—but I question Casagrande's assertion that Los Angeles and San Antonio, for example, are part of the same nation as Monterrey and Tijuana. If anything, Monterrey is more like Mexico City than any U.S. city. I have never heard a Mexican refer to Los Angeles or San Antonio as Mexican cities, despite their recognizably large Mexican populations. To argue that Juárez, Tijuana, and Monterrey share a regional identity is a provocative assertion, but to claim that American cities are part of the same nation today seems to ignore political, social, and economic history. Casagrande may want Americans to come to grips with a dynamic and changing Mexico, but substituting one simplistic vision for another is not the means to this worthy goal. Once again, we seem to be imposing a gringo vision on our distant neighbor.

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It's unfortunate that the textbook writing on the geography of Latin America can't be of the genre of the article, "The Five Nations of Mexico." The division of Mexico into the five regions described is both innovative and intriguing. The writing is straightforward and informative.

I made use of the concepts presented in the article in a class that I taught at the University of the Americas in Puebla, Mexico, earlier this year. I also intend to introduce them to a class on Middle America and the Caribbean to be given here this fall.

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Quiz answers  
(from page 1)  
1. E, X  
2. b, c  
3. E  
4. F, K  
5. a  
6. d  
7. A, C, H, M  
8. b, d  
9. a  
10. A, D; H, I  
11. D, G  
12. a, c, d  
13. b  
14. t  
15. f, j

The editor welcomes correspondence on topics related to FOCUS features. Letters may be edited for clarity and brevity.