

By Elaina Loveland

Mexico Rising

An interview with Vicente Fox, former president of Mexico

PRESIDENT VICENTE FOX IS KNOWN AS A VISIONARY LEADER with a deep understanding of the economic and social challenges facing Latin America. He is one of the world's most important voices on the contemporary geo-political landscape and the role of business in the developing world.

When elected to the presidency of Mexico in 2000, Fox broke the hold that the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party had held on the State for seven decades. A charismatic reformer, President Fox is credited as playing a vital role in Mexico's democratization, and with strengthening the country's economy. During his tenure, he succeeded in controlling inflation and interest rates, and in achieving the lowest unemployment rate in all of Latin America.

Since leaving office, Fox has continued to be active on the global stage. In January 2007, he founded the Fox Center, Mexico's first presidential library and museum. Much of the Center's programming focuses on promoting democracy and transparency around the world. Fox released his autobiography, *Revolution of Hope: The Life, Faith and Dreams of a Mexican President*, in September 2007. Fox will sign copies of his book at the NAFSA conference following his plenary address on May 27.

As a young man, Fox studied at the Ibero-American University in Mexico City and took courses administered by the Harvard University Business School. He then joined the working world and began driving a truck for the Coca-Cola Company in 1964. He was quickly promoted, and soon became the youngest executive to ever be appointed president of Coca-Cola for Mexico and Latin America. President Fox began his political career in 1988 with his election to represent his home state of Guanajuato in the Mexican Congress. He then served as Governor of Guanajuato from 1995 until his election as President in 2000.

IE: The story of your career one that embodies what Americans call the "American dream." How does this embody the "Mexican dream" as well?

FOX: In Mexico achieving the 'American dream' is a key process. For the ascension of a people, individuals need that incentive of having the possibility of living your own personal American dream and I say 'American' because it is for all of the Americans—North Americans, South Americans, and Central Americans, including Mexicans.

For my own American dream, I have the inspiration of my grandfather who came from Cincinnati, Ohio. He came to Mexico in 1895 to pursue his own American dream and he found it here in Mexico, which has been very inspiring for me personally.

My participation in the Coca-Cola Company was a key opportunity in building my own American dream. I love to be out of the office. I love to wear my jeans, my coat, and I like to be where the action is. When I got my job at Coca-Cola and they told me you're going to drive a truck, you're going to go all throughout Mexico and you're going to be selling Coca-Cola without a jacket and a tie, I said, "This is my job!" I just got into working for the company with that entrepreneurial spirit of my grandfather and my father with the inspiration of the American dream. I started working hard on the truck selling Coke and I knew I was going to be comfortable in 10 years after I was the president of this company in Mexico.



Vicente Fox

IE: As a young man, you attended the Ibero-American University in Mexico City and took courses administered by Harvard Business School. How did the opportunity to take courses from a foreign institution benefit your knowledge and affect your career?

FOX: All education is a process from the very early years of schooling. My own education was with the Jesuits in Jesuit schools and at a Jesuit university, the Ibero-American University. In that learning environment, you get something that you cannot get anywhere else and that knowledge is not just technological know-how—it is inspiration, it is leadership, it is commitment, and it is motivation. This is the philosophy of the founder of the Jesuit order, St. Ignatius of Loyola: you will only find your self-satisfaction, your self-joy, your self-accomplishment of your dreams through being for others, working for others, and serving others. That became one of my key components of my thinking, which I nourished myself with all my life in school.

I always had a hunger for more knowledge and a hunger to serve others, to be for others. My dream of serving others through working at Coca-Cola is what led me to participate in courses administered by Harvard Business School (HBS). It was part of my management training with Coca-Cola. Taking courses from a foreign institution like HBS was assisted me in learning the vanguard of knowledge in business, in

business administration, and in business marketing. It really helped me to complete myself by not only having the inspiration of Loyola but also having the knowledge of one of the best universities worldwide.

IE: Why did you decide to enter politics?

FOX: I entered politics mainly because of the philosophy of the Jesuits that I received from my education and also from the inspiration of my family, my father, and my mother. When I started working with business living here in Mexico, I began to experience frustration with the economy, frustration with the political structure, frustration with dictatorship—witnessing corruption all over Mexico because of this monopoly of power of the police, the system and the party that governed Mexico for 72 years. Witnessing the frustration of what we (my family and I) were living with here in Mexico—the authoritarian government, the lack of freedom, the total and absolute control of the economy, without the freedom to start your own business—all of this together started me to abandon the ranks of private entrepreneur and move into public life. And finally, it was an additional way—a more dynamic way—of serving others. That's what public life should mean. That's what politics is for—is working for the common good. I had emptiness within me between the ages of 35 and 40 and that was when I started looking for challenges that would make my life more fulfilled, which led me to public life.

IE: Your election broke the hold of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party that had held sway over Mexico for seven decades. What did this accomplishment mean for Mexico as a nation and for you personally?

FOX: Well, for me personally, I have always liked to take risks and meet challenges. I have always liked goals that are heroic—goals that are way, way above what most people think is possible. Having exceptional goals is the best way to keep yourself moving, to keep yourself searching, and to keep yourself challenged. Since the very beginning, I have had high goals and that heroic goal of going really far beyond expectations is the one that inspired me to participate in politics. For me, becoming the first president to break the 72-year-old regime, meant a great deal. It meant not only the self-satisfaction of having the possibility of serving others but also meeting my own challenges and meeting my own aspirations that I enjoy in life—meeting chal-



There are about 3,000 scholarships that we had in Mexico for students to go for Ph.D.s, and to go for post-graduate study in different universities worldwide. And that's where we really are enriching our human capital for the long-term.

enges. I like to ride horses and take risks. I like to ride motorcycles and take risks. I like to invest in business and take risks. I like to work in politics and take the risks associated with change. So that has been part of my life, risk-taking and I love that. It really inspires me and it motivates me.

In regard to what it meant for Mexico, it meant leaving behind an intolerable monopoly on the exercise of power. Leaving behind the lack of freedom of press, freedom of information to people, and the beginning of eradicating corruption in the nation. It signaled the beginning of a profound change, only not only from a totalitarian government to a democratic government through democratic elections that we have in Mexico today, but also moving from a system of democratic elections into a functional democracy that has given Mexico the new opportunities that we have not had in centuries.

For instance, in the last 10 years, poverty in Mexico had decreased by 35 percent, which of course, is very motivating to me. Reducing the number of families in poverty is something that really gave me the energy to give more attention to other social issues. But that only comes from democracy. Eradicating corruption and finally having the possibility of eradicating poverty and fighting against crime is still at work today but I am sure our current president, Felipe Calderón, will overcome those challenges.

IE: You are credited for playing a vital role in Mexico's democratization and with strengthening the country's economy. How did you embark on these visionary challenges?

FOX: First of all, it doesn't take a lot of wisdom to know that poverty in Mexico is the worst of the evils that we have, which is the main challenge that we have to resolve and that it is urgent to solve because democracies do not exist when you have severe poverty or where you have ignorance. If you want to consolidate your democracy, you must

work on reducing poverty and increasing people's education levels. For instance, their poverty connected these three variables. So the number one challenge that I came into the presidency with was reducing poverty. The number one decision I made was that there could be no more increase of poor families in Mexico. So I needed to ensure the patrimony of every single family in Mexico, specifically the poor. There could be no more widespread breakdowns of the economy, no more crises, no more devaluation of the currency, no more high rates of inflation, and no more high rates of interest. So that was my number one goal in my government.

What did we need to accomplish this? Well, we needed stability. That would mean no more crises that would affect the poor. So I told myself I have to guarantee the patrimony of every single family in Mexico. That's the first step. Step number two, upon that fundamental, I had to start building opportunities to assure that families—through their own effort—would have the opportunity to increase the patrimony of their trade.

IE: What was one of your greatest accomplishments regarding higher education during your presidency?

FOX: Well, first we had to bring in the fundamentals to maximize the opportunities for kids in school. In Mexico, the first six years of education is primary school, which is different than in the United States, where it is eight years. Ninety-eight percent of the kids are enrolled in primary school. In middle school, which is the next four years, 92 percent of kids at that age are in schools. When you are in *preparatoria* (high school), which is the next 3 years, only 45 percent of kids are in schools. So as you can see, Mexican children start withdrawing at early ages, leaving schools to go to work, frequently at 8 years old, 10 years old, or 12 years old. They are withdrawn by their families to work and try to help the family's income, especially children from poor families.

Before tackling higher education, the first step for me was to ensure that those children would stay in schools so that they would have the necessary tools to continue their education at the university level. To tackle this problem of children leaving schools early I developed a scholarship system to make sure that all of them would stay in school. At the university level in Mexico when I started my government, only 19 percent of kids at the age of being enrolled in a university would be in a university. I was able to increase the number of students attending universities from 19 percent to 24 percent. We have to keep working very strongly to make sure that the pyramid we're building from primary school through high school, will now extend to universities. Of the educational scholarships I established, 1 million were for universities.

Additionally, there are about 3,000 scholarships that we had in Mexico for students to go for Ph.D.s, and to go for post-graduate study in different universities worldwide. And that's where we really are enriching our human capital for the long-term.

IE: How has Mexico changed in recent decades and from your perspective, how has the nation advanced opportunity for Mexican students to fulfill their educational aspirations and achieve the skills needed to enter the workforce?

FOX: Mexico is the most global economy in the world. This provides an opportunity for Mexican students. Mexico has 42 trade agreements with 42 economies worldwide, which is about 80 percent of foreign world gross product. Consequently, Mexico has a unique situation in globalization. We must be competitive worldwide. The number one factor for advancement for young Mexicans is to ensure that economically, our country remains competitive to compete in the global economy and continue to provide opportunities for the younger generation of Mexicans.

Another change in Mexico to benefit the future generation of Mexicans has been the advent of democracy. If you have democracy, you have freedom. When you have freedom, you have choices. When you have choices, you can see what you present in China, what you present in the United States or in Europe, what you present within Mexico and this is motivational for young Mexicans to improve themselves and envision a better future.

Finally, we have virtual circles in which the economy is moving, that you're reducing poverty, that you're increasing freedom and democracy, so you have momentum. And Mexico has momentum. According to what Goldman Sachs has projected, in the year 2040 Mexico will be the fifth largest economy in the world. (The United States will be the second largest economy, China will be the number one, India will be number three, Japan number four, and Mexico number five.) So we have momen-

tum in a virtual circle where everybody is motivated to work.

IE: In January 2007, you founded the Fox Center, Mexico's first presidential library and museum. What inspired you to embark on this project and what is its significance?

FOX: First of all, I didn't want to retire. The forces that inspired me were number one, I wanted to give my spiritual dynamism inspired by my Jesuit education; number two, by seeing all the former presidents in the United States like President Clinton, President Carter, growing after their presidency. I learned that there is life after the presidency. So I had the inspiration of this library based on presidential libraries in the United States that I have visited several times.

The other reason is that we have a need for a new trend among our presidents in Latin America. There is a long-standing trend

where a number of former presidents, in Latin American nations, would run away or be thrown out of the country after their presidential term ended because of corruption.

I want to reverse that trend. In inspiring the community to change in old-fashioned cultures like the one that we have here in Mexico I have a lot of opponents, a lot of political enemies trying to dissuade me from starting such a library. But we are associated with different universities such as Georgetown, George Washington University, Northwestern, Emory, in the United States and universities in Spain like the University of Salamanca, with the Technologia de Monterrey in Mexico or with Queens University in Canada. We have associated with all them and we have started our own programs here. We have associated with the RAND Corporation and others. So the presidential library is becoming a very strong platform with many institutions and we are building our name so we could promote

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strong, bright ideas like democracy, freedom, market economy and responsibility, entrepreneurship, social politics, and gender equity, all of which are key missions of the Fox Center.

IE: Can you share an anecdote from your book, *Revolution of Hope: The Life, Faith*

and Dreams of a Mexican President that you think would inspire readers who deal with college students about how one person can make a major impact on society?

FOX: One message I would like to share is that immigration is not just an issue between the United States and Mexico—it is a

world issue. It is not a contemporary issue. It has been an issue since Adam and Eve left paradise. Migration builds very special kind of people. I say that because we are all migrants from the very beginning. We move out of our houses to go to school. We move out of primary school to go to high school. We move away from home and from our community to go to university. We move from our nation to go to work in China, to go to work in Mexico, or to go to work in Bangladesh. We are all migrants and migrants should be welcome and adopted in every single nation including the United States. And it is very sad to think that the leader of a nation that promoted openness, that promoted globalization now is doing a war—that's a shame for the United States.

Another message from my book that I want to share involves leadership. I would say leadership is the sense of building your own life, of having a mission, of having a commitment to go far, to transform, to change, and to move the spirits and souls of all the people. Leadership is has given me a great reward in my life.

A final component of my message involves spiritual commitment together with compassion. I think that is a key ingredient in our life. Politicians in the case of the Latin American do not frequently speak about religion, speak about spiritual life, speak about universal policies. So politics is very empty—it's very corrupt. We need more ethical behavior. We need more moral authority. We need more spiritual commitment to move our lives in to a stage of happiness toward self-realization, which we don't get with material things.

IE: What do you hope will be your legacy as a former president of Mexico?

FOX: Love. I love my wife Marta and I love my life in which I find myself happy, self-fulfilled, and comfortable. So love is a key ingredient and that's what I like to share with everybody as long as I live. It is what I have to give.

IE

ELAINA LOVELAND is managing editor of *IE*.

NEW CENTURY CIRCLE

MEMBER PROFILE



REBECCA SMITH-MURDOCK
University of North Texas
NAFSA member since: 1981

“it seems natural that I should give financially to an organization...”

Favorite place to visit: Places with mountains for hiking (so that leaves lots of possibilities)

Book currently on your bedside table: There are a stack of books in various stages of completion, including a Le Carré novel, Madeleine Albright's biography, Don Quixote, a Spanish language textbook, and journals. I have a big bedside table.

Favorite NAFSA conference site: Miami

Other than international education, what is your fantasy career?: Landscape gardener who travels all over the world for jobs, inspiration, education, and additional plants.

Who is the person you would most like to meet from history?: Queen Elizabeth I

Why did you pledge to the New Century Circle?: NAFSA has provided me with knowledge, training, leadership opportunities, challenges, colleagues, and friends. The NAFSA network has informed and sustained me and many other people I know through professional challenges and changes . . . it seems natural that I should give financially to an organization that is so important to me, to the profession of international education, and to decisionmakers in government, education, and business.

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