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William F. Foote is an Institute Fellow examining the economic substructure of Mexico.

A Struggle for Power

Mexico City flickers into the 21st Century

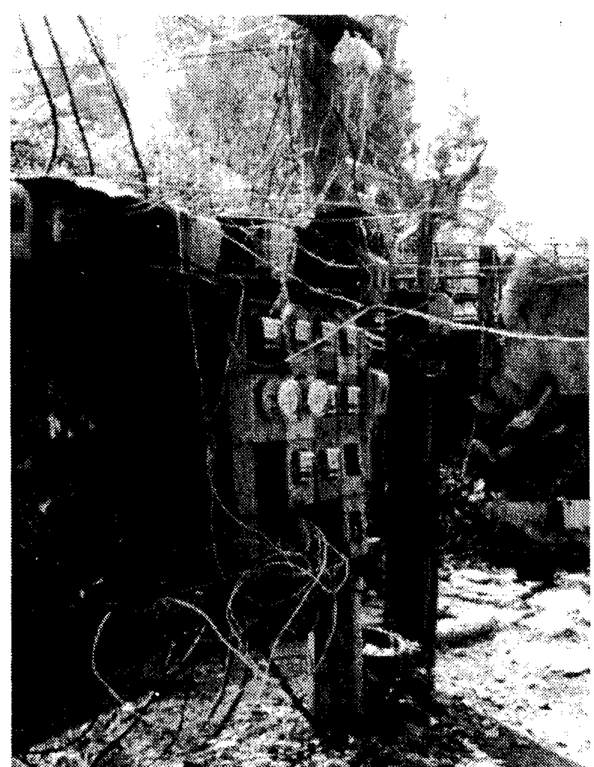
MEXICO CITY, Mexico January 3, 1997

By William F. Foote

María Elena García, a housekeeper, was once an electricity thief. In 1980, fresh from the countryside, she helped invade a ridge-top on the western edge of Mexico City. Poor folks pitched makeshift houses. To illuminate them, they sneaked cables up nearby power lines where tangled wires hung like spaghetti from electric poles. More people came, the community grew. In time, the government regularized their land claims and installed basic services. Today, Mrs. Elena is a registered client of Central Power and Light — *Luz y Fuerza del Centro* (LFC), the state-owned distribution company of Mexico City.

"I am very proud of our neighborhood," she says, walking up a concrete drive toward her brick house with a TV antenna on top. "We could not have done it without LFC."

Power-distribution companies in Latin America have a tough job. Struggling against the rapid expansion of new residential areas, they face huge electricity losses (usually 25 to 30 percent of power distributed) due to widespread theft by residential, commercial and industrial users. Because of political constraints, utilities also charge highly subsidized rates that keep them from recovering costs and lead to chronic under-investment. Employing bloated work forces and archaic technology, they typically represent billion-dollar drains on national economies.



Illegal wires hung from electricity meters to "hijack" energy from Central Power and Light

Nevertheless, for millions of urban poor like Mrs. Elena, bad service is better than darkness. Considering the pressures of galloping urban growth, one might excuse a public utility for its inefficiencies.

ICWA LETTERS

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One might even praise such distribution companies for merely coping under adverse conditions. But a close look at LFC here in Mexico City suggests otherwise. Indeed, power-industry experts say the sprawling utility, which services some 25 million customers in central Mexico, falls well below Latin American standards, not to mention those of industrialized countries.

Just two years ago, the federal government was forced to assume U.S.$6.6 billion of LFC debt. This provides an indication of the utility's disastrous financial situation. Observers say the work force, with 36,000 union members and 10,000 pensioners, could be reduced by 50 percent without affecting productivity. Half are employed in non-core activities including a construction company, electric-post and switchboard factories and myriad repair shops. As for service quality, suffice it to note that Mexico City has 100 times as much power outage as New York City, or an average 500 minutes annually versus five minutes, respectively.

Mrs. Elena (right) walks the paved roads of the hill top she helped invade in 1980.

"It really is a terrible company," says Arturo Gonzalez, who worked with LFC as a representative of the U.S. consulting firm, McKinsey, in the early 1990s.

Still, in light of Mexico's ongoing recession, LFC's troubles are hardly unique and might have gone unnoticed if other Latin American cities had not demonstrated how unnecessary they are. As far back as the 1970s, the Chilean government sold off its public electricity distributor in Santiago. Today, that utility forms part of a holding company called Enersis that trades on the New York Stock Exchange. After a spate of more recent privatizations (1990s), distribution companies have, to varying degrees, become increasingly profitable in some of the region's largest cities: Buenos Aires, Lima, São Paulo, Rio de Janiero.[1]

In general, private operators have been extremely fast in improving production, both by downsizing work forces and introducing systems and technology that were not used by government administrators. Not that there are any private panaceas or 'silver-bullet' solutions. However, as seen in South America, public-private partnerships have thrown light on viable solutions to the problems of basic-services provision that plague the broke, virtually bankrupt cities of the region.

Ironically, Mexico was a prince of privatization not long ago. In the early 1990s, state sell-offs helped kick-start the process of modernizing the country's economy as the government liquidated more than 220 businesses, earning U.S.$23 billion for its coffers. Surely, the Harvard- and Yale-educated technocrats running the government knew that power distribution, along with thermal generation, offered the greatest potential for introducing competition into the electricity sector. In other Latin American countries, these activities had already been separated, or "unbundled," from existing vertically-integrated utilities, and had either been auctioned off or were operating under concession. For all the talk of reform and modernization in Mexico, nary a word was said about restructuring, let alone privatizing, LFC.

In an attempt to explain why, this newsletter first highlights the key historical determinants of LFC's current and troubled state of affairs. More recently, in an effort to reduce public expenditures, the government pondered, albeit in private, the modernization of LFC. It even hired McKinsey to design a new company from scratch. Such efforts buckled, however, under the perceived weight of opposition from organized labor. Fearing embarrassing demonstrations, paralyzing strikes and even sabotage, the authorities acquiesced to union demands for the *status quo*.

The result is hardly encouraging. Mexico has fallen behind. While models of modernized distribution companies shine across a growing number of Latin American capitals, LFC seems destined to leave this capital flickering precariously into the 21st Century.

THE FORCES OF DECLINE

That the name of Mexico City's first electricity company, Mexican Power and Light (MP&L), had no Spanish translation says much about the country's economy during the early 20th century. In 1906, an American engineer received a concession from longtime dictator Porfirio Diaz to provide electricity to the federal capital and nearby cities of Toluca, Cuernavaca and Pachuca. A visionary businessman, Frederick Pierson saw great potential for the power industry in Mexico. He brought British

1. In December 1996, a group led by Enersis paid U.S.$587 million for 70% of Rio de Janeiro state's electricity distributor. The consortium has announced plans to invest U.S.$800 million in the Brazilian utility over the next seven years (*Latin Finance*, December 1996).

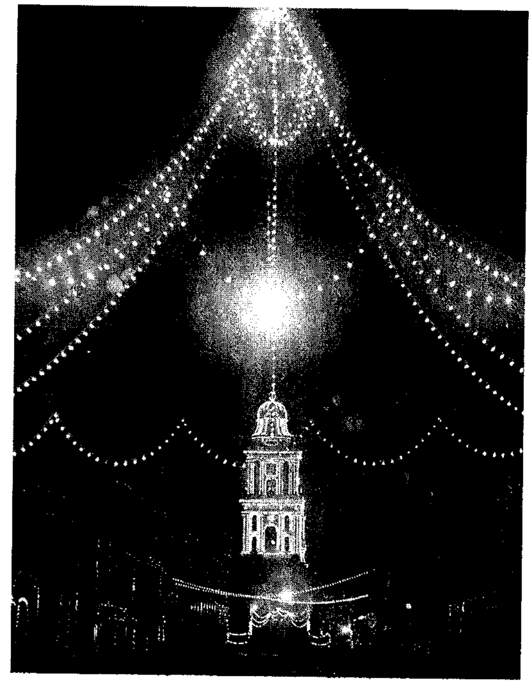
and Belgian investors on board. Weathering the Revolution, they built MP&L into a profitable company, maximizing shareholder dividends through, among other things, dirt-cheap labor.

By all accounts, the workers were exploited. In 1914, they founded the Mexican Electricians' Union — *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas* (SME) — which considered their foreign bosses, or *patrones*, mortal enemies. In the mid-thirties, populist president Lazaro Cárdenas came to SME's defense, forcing the "Yankee imperialists" to sign a labor agreement weighted heavily in favor of the union. Pierson's wage policy had backfired. During subsequent decades, the restrictive nature of that labor contract would cripple company operations while fostering a pampered, bloated work force. After MP&L's nationalization in 1960, moreover, the Cárdenas legacy would plague the government itself, which, by replacing the foreign owners as *patrón*, became the union's new sworn enemy.

Another defining moment in MP&L's history came with the founding of the Federal Electricity Commission — *Comisión Federal de Electricidad* (CFE). In 1937, President Cárdenas issued a decree creating a state-owned utility to service rural areas of Mexico. Profits, after all, could not be made in rural towns with low service densities offering marginal returns. So CFE began electrifying the countryside, where the majority of Mexicans still resided. In stark contrast to Pierson's company, CFE was conceived of and for the people. As such, its workers would become staunch supporters of the government, setting the stage for a face-off between electricians' unions that would play havoc with the power industry years later.

Built in the early 1900s in the state of Puebla, the Necaxa plant, pictured above, was one of Mexico's first electric generation facilities.

In 1960, the authorities took over MP&L, changing its name to a Spanish one: *Compañia de Luz y Fuerza del Centro* (CLFC). Immediately, CLFC entered a bizarre legal situation as the decree required that the distributor begin liquidating itself. It was to be folded into the national power system. In the meantime, Mexican law stipulated that any business in liquidation could carry out only those functions that are specifically related to the liquidation process: *i.e.*, paying creditors and employees, administering equipment, maintaining assets. Prohibited from having a board of directors, with no investment schedule or strategic planning, the company entered a state of operational and managerial limbo.



Night illumination of the cathedral in Mexico City during the centenial celebration of 1910. The lavish use of electricity symbolized technological progress.

This was supposed to be only temporary. Soon CFE would incorporate the Mexico City network and its work force into the national system and all would be well. However, while technical integration went smoothly, the workers caused a fuss. Their unions were dead set against integration. In 1973, when President Luis Echeverría tried to force their hand, street violence erupted, people were killed, and the government backed down. Frustrated and angry, the head of state declared CLFC in an indefinite state of liquidation. It lasted for the next 20 years!

In synthesis, CLFC had developed two major problems: a highly restrictive labor agreement and a disabling state of liquidation. Their full impact can only be understood, however, against the backdrop of chaotic urban growth in Mexico City. CLFC's service territory had grown too fast and too much for too many years. Absorbing five million people in the 1970s alone, the federal capital had sprouted new neighborhoods like weeds. The effects of this urban explosion on company operations were two-fold: on one hand, subsidized tariffs, which helped control social unrest in the overcrowded slums, kept the utility from recovering costs; on the other, widespread theft of electricity eroded profits even further.

In developing countries, electricity tariffs are typically used as an income-distribution function. Curiously, in

Mexico these subsidies are particularly high due to the exorbitant cost of power generation in the country. Mexico has relatively little hydroelectric generation capacity, which offers the cheapest kind of power. Countries like Canada, with abundant rivers, can practically give electricity away. Because Mexico has a dearth of rivers — all of them combined have less water than the runoff of the Mississippi — it relies on more expensive thermal power for some 75 percent of its actual generation.[2]

At the same time, because Mexico's cost of capital is so high — investors usually expect a minimum return of 25 percent on equity — building power plants is expensive. This helps explain why the average cost of generation in Mexico is 3.5 U.S. cents per kilowatt-hour versus roughly 2.5 cents in the U.S. Because of subsidies, however, customers pay nowhere near that price, which creates a huge gap between revenues and costs. That the distribution company manages to stay afloat is attributable only to massive direct transfers from the Federal Treasury, such as the aforementioned $6.6 billion of company debt the government assumed in 1994.

As if subsidies were not trouble enough, CLFC had also to worry about millions of urban residents, like Mrs. Elena, stealing electricity. As Mexico City grew, low-income households developed myriad ingenious ways to pilfer energy. In addition to simply tapping into power lines by hanging cables, there were the so-called *diablitos* (little devils), or jerry-rigged wires that bypass household meters so power consumed does not register. Industries and commercial establishments frequently fiddled with meters, too, or bribed the meter readers. Thieves even began cutting down the power lines themselves, melting the cables and selling the copper on the black market.

Throw in the considerable losses caused by ancient, poorly-maintained infrastructure, and CLFC was losing anywhere from 25 to 35 percent of the electricity it distributed. With that kind of power hemorrhaging, combined with the subsidies, the liquidation process, the straight-jacket labor agreement, the recalcitrant union and an ever-expanding Mexico City, most public utilities would have blown a fuse. Luckily, in the 1970s, Mexico was atop the petroleum-producing world and therefore flush with cash — but not for long.

TO PULL (OR NOT TO PULL) THE PLUG

It was the challenge of Jorge Gutierrez's life. In 1982, President Miguel de la Madrid named him director of Mexico City's troubled public utility. With a Master's degree in electrical engineering from a Scottish university and 20 years' work experience at the Federal Electricity Commission, he received his presidential mandate: reform the budget-busting company.

Months earlier, Mexico's fortunes had plummeted in the face of falling oil prices, an astonishing balance of payments deficit and a staggering foreign debt. In the 1980s, the debt crisis would change the nature of the Mexican economy. It would demonstrate the impossibility of sustaining economic growth in an environment void of competition and saturated with subsidies and debt.

Mr. Gutierrez, who is now the dean of the engineering school at Universidad Anahuac, a private college in the northwestern outskirts of Mexico City, went straight to work. First, he planned to install computers, increase worker productivity through hydraulically-assisted trucks and automate distribution networks. Mechanization, he reasoned, was a good place to start. Or was it? As Gutierrez soon found out, there *were* no good places to start.

"What a nightmare," he recalls. "Every move we made, every suggestion we had, required head-butt negotiations with the union."

Long live the Cárdenas legacy. Since its signing in

Jorge Gutierrez Vera, the former director of CLFC, works the phone in his office at the University of Anauhac.

2. The approximate cost of hydroelectricity per kilowatt-hour is one U.S. cent, versus up to eight cents per kilowatt-hour for coal-powered thermal energy.

1937, the lopsided labor agreement had stubbornly defied the passage of time. A veritable bible of electricians' rights, it now totaled 483 pages (in the paperback edition), specifying thousands of iron-clad worker commandments. Gutierrez recited the most onerous clauses that made his mission nearly impossible.

Article 17 stipulates precise job descriptions for all positions in the company. When Gutierrez introduced computers, for example, the workers demanded extra payment to use them since such tasks were not specified in the 60-year-old labor contract. Likewise, Gutierrez recounted how his chauffeur had explained to him, pedantically, that his job was to drive a standard-transmission vehicle, not to deliver a message for the company president to his colleagues standing 100 yards away across the parking lot.

"By subdividing responsibilities," explains the engineer, "this rule helped multiply the number of CLFC workers exponentially."

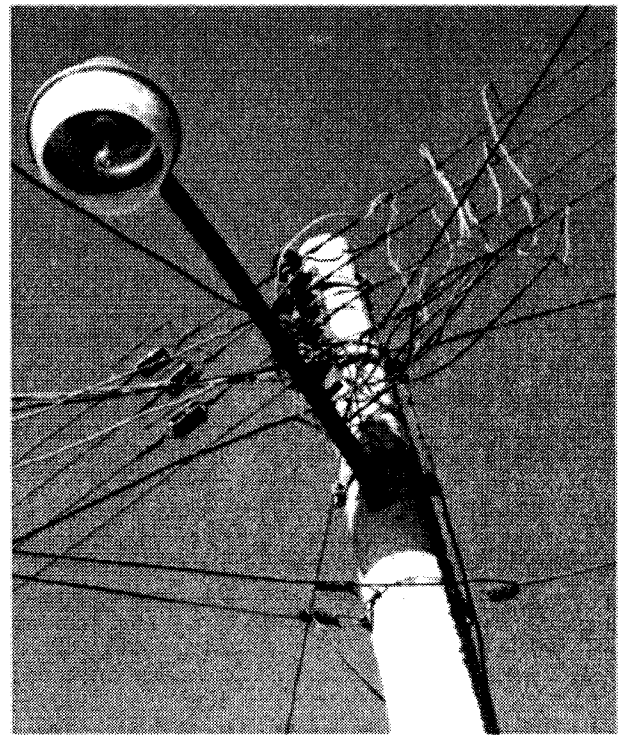
The most costly article was No. 10. It required the so-called "direct administration" of all activities related to the electricity business — that is, it prohibited any outsourcing of non-core business. In compliance with this rule, CLFC built factories for meters, transformers, switchboards, electric posts, copper wires and so on. Gutierrez claims the utility became the only power distributor in the world with its own construction company. And then there were the repair shops, where the company paid more to fix a piece of equipment than to buy a new one.

"The waste was astounding," says Gutierrez. "In the mid-1980s, the union even demanded that we start manufacturing our own trucks!"

Nothing, however, miffed him more than the clause pertaining to meter readers. The labor agreement established that, for a good day's work, a reader should cover 250 meters. As an incentive, employees would receive two percent of their base salary for every additional meter read. In 1937, this was a reasonable policy as one would have had to walk half way across Mexico City to read 250 meters. As the decades passed, however, and the city's population compressed, there came a time when workers could easily log 1,000 meters in a matter of hours. The readers got rich.

"As the company president," states Gutierrez, "I was earning less than these guys — most of whom hadn't even gone to high school."

So the 1980s came and went with minimal change. A fresh plan emerged in the early 1990s. Newly-elected President Carlos Salinas de Gortari instructed Gutierrez to hire a consulting firm to help him design a new company. After 20 years in limbo, CLFC was finally going to be liquidated. The president, interestingly enough, was acting on advice from the World Bank, which had urged him to conduct an organizational study of the entire power sector, to which it was lending large amounts of capital. Restructuring the electricity industry was part and parcel of Salinas's free-market reforms.



These jerry-rigged wires hanging from an electric post are just one reason why CLFC needs help.

McKinsey won the mandate in a competitive bidding process against most of the major U.S. consulting firms. One of the consultants assigned to the project was the above-mentioned Arturo Gonzalez, an electrical engineer by training, who now works at Citibank in Mexico. In a recent interview, Gonzalez explained that McKinsey's general recommendation was to divide the national power system into three separate businesses: generation, transmission and distribution. "That's how it's done all over the world," he said.

After that, Mckinsey advised, the government should pursue public-private partnerships wherever possible. Generation, the easiest area in which to introduce competition, could be partially or fully privatized. Transmission, a natural monopoly, would remain in government hands. Distribution, especially CLFC, could also be auctioned off, or run under concession. But these were long-term goals. Their success depended on prior and significant legislative reform — namely, the phasing out of subsidies as well as the laying down of a new regulatory framework. This would enable the establishment of transparent business relations within the power sector based on purely commercial, arms-length terms.

In the meantime, McKinsey recommended that Mexico City's electricity distributor follow the example of its South American counterparts and restructure itself in preparation for an eventual privatization. With that goal in mind, the consulting team spent an entire year planning every aspect of a new utility: organizational structure, job descriptions, a more flexible labor agreement. The study went so far as to specify the precise locations of new customer-service offices throughout Mexico City.

"We designed a new company from scratch," said Gonzalez. "The assumption was that the old CLFC would simply disappear."

For his part, Gutierrez prepared to negotiate these changes with SME, the distributor's combative union. He planned to capitalize on the union's fear that a restructuring of the power sector would presage the integration of SME's 36,000 workers into the larger union of the national power system (about 60,000 workers). Gutierrez knew how SME cherished its autonomy. So he suggested that Salinas strike a deal: in exchange for guaranteeing the union's independence, the workers must agree to renegotiate, once and for all, their outmoded labor agreement.

In 1992, their work complete, the consultants invited Salinas to attend an official presentation of the CLFC study. Gonzalez, one of the presenters, recounted his surprise at the president's response. "He thanked us for our efforts," recalled Gonzalez, "but then said he was sorry, that he could not liquidate the company, that he would not be the one to pull the plug."

"He thanked us for our efforts," recalled Gonzalez, "but then said he was sorry, that he could not liquidate the company, that he would not be the one to pull the plug."

The room went silent. There was Salinas, at the height of his free-market reforms, well on the way to signing NAFTA, yet backing down from restructuring CLFC. Why? Some point to political debts. For example, in 1988, after shrewd calculations, the SME union had backed Salinas on the campaign trail. Just before the elections, voters watched thousands of cheering electricians supporting the candidate at televised rallies. This outraged much of the labor movement, which staunchly opposed the technocrat's conservative platform. Salinas, however, was ecstatic. His decision not to liquidate was, perhaps, SME's reward.

Another theory suggests that Salinas simply feared union opposition. This was understandable in light of the worrisome precedent set by state-employed Pemex oil workers in the 1980s. When the government tried to rein in their union's economic and political power, oil wells across the country began exploding. What was to stop similar sabotage from happening in the power sector? Moreover, with a government as politically and geographically centralized as Mexico's, Salinas knew that power outages in Mexico City — by strike or sabotage — could paralyze the entire country.

Whatever the cause, the effect was that nothing changed. The McKinsey study languished in a government file. Gutierrez, who had staked his reputation on the restructuring, resigned. On February 8th, 1994, the government officially terminated CLFC's liquidation process. Lifting U.S.$6.6 billion worth of debt fromthe distributor's books, it reconstituted the public utility as a stand-alone, decentralized agency of the Mexican government.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

"The rules in this book," says Kenneth Smith, holding the 1996-97 edition of CLFC's labor agreement, "cannot be ignored or defied."

Mr. Smith, the steely-eyed son of a British immigrant to Mexico, resembles Ernest Hemingway in his dotage: silvery beard, half-moon reading glasses, barrel chest and belly, dungarees and suspenders. A labor activist turned administrator, he was once a card-carrying union man but now stands on the other side. Keenly aware of the parameters established by the labor agreement, he is in charge of modernizing the electric company without crossing the union.

"Whatever changes we make cannot contravene the labor contract or reduce the number of workers currently employed," Smith explains, unequivocally. Sitting at his desk on the top floor of CLFC's Mexico City headquarters, he spoke instead of fostering a new attitude toward change within the work force. There are ways, he believes, to avoid a traumatic transition toward modernization while, at the same time, improving management and operations.

For instance, the company could create business units that partition its service territory into smaller, more accountable components. Regionally-based operations would help step up surveillance on electricity theft, too. At the same time, CLFC could scrap its traditional policy of blind promotions. In the past, whenever vacancies came open, the worker with seniority automatically got the job, regardless of merit. Eliminating this rule would help ensure that the most productive people are promoted, thus encouraging internal competition between employees. No doubt, these are good ideas, but have any been implemented?

"Not just yet," Smith replies. "We're still negotiating the details with the union."

In the meantime, other efforts are afoot to help CLFC reform itself. The National Commission for Saving Energy — *Comisíon Nacional de Ahorro de Energía* (CONAE) — for example, is advising the utility on ways to reduce its own electricity consumption. Carlos Chavez, who heads up CONAE's buildings and public lighting division, recently analyzed CLFC's headquarters, where Smith's office is located. As he explained his findings, and how he had toured the offices under the watchful eye of union escorts, I detected a tincture of frustration.

"They listen to our advice on light bulbs and turning down the air conditioning," he said, "but not much more."

If he had his way, Chavez would first require CLFC to start measuring the energy it consumes — in administrative offices, factories, repair shops, substations, union quarters. Next, he would end the company's tradition of not charging its 46,000 employees and pensioners for their household electricity. Chavez would also insist that CLFC's buildings serve as models of efficient energy consumption for Mexican society at large. The fact that its headquarters now use twice as much power as most similar-size offices in Mexico City is, said Chavez, "inexcusable."

Exiting the CLFC headquarters after meeting Mr. Smith, I stopped at the sidewalk to observe the soviet-style block structure. It was nighttime and I could see the Anglo-Mexican's office lights flooding through the windows high above. I recalled his panoramic view of the sprawling Valley of Mexico, illuminated as far as the eye can see by the electric power of CLFC. Quite an accomplishment, one must admit. But at what cost? ❑

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Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M Litt Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball An economist, Chris Ball holds a B A from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

John Harris A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M B A from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators and manager of a $7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Marc Michaelson A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan With a B A in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research" [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health With a B.A in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources [sub-SAHARA]

John B. Robinson A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of KiSwahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995 He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution [sub-SAHARA]

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