

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Bearded But at Large in Mexico

Tepoztlan, Morelos

Mexico

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In September of last year, I read a wire-service story in the Tucson Daily Star reporting that the American consulate in Mexico City had warned tourists not to expect much help from the consulate should they be jailed in Mexico. It said that hundreds of Americans each year spend time in Mexican jails without the right of habeas corpus or the chance of bail. The guiding principle in pre-trial handling of persons arrested was said to be "guilty until proven innocent." The article emphasized that while the most dramatic examples of unjust imprisonment occur in cases of suspected drug offenses, drivers blamelessly involved in traffic accidents receive almost equally harsh treatment. It told of one American family whose station wagon was rammed by a bus in the center of a provincial city. Following standard company procedures, the driver of the bus left the scene immediately after the crash. The police arrived, arrested the American driver, and jailed him for two weeks, until his insurance company posted a bond. It ruined the family's vacation.

Up to the time when I saw that story and, in the weeks that followed, two others like it, the worst I was expecting of Mexico was entirely gastro-intestinal. Then, in October, my expectations were further clouded by the suggestion that Andy and Winnie and I would be harrassed at the border and in Mexico because Andy and I were wearing long beards and because the three of us represented an unconventional social grouping. When we were in San Francisco and Los Angeles preparing for the trip south, friends almost invariably raised the spectre of intolerant Mexican police. They told us about relatively conventional people who had been stopped at the frontier and denied entrance until they had cut their hair or beards and proved their solvency. If we should get past the border hazards, they said, local police or Federales would see our beards, smell drug traffic, and detain us for many hours in miserable quarters. Some said this reflected a general Mexican distaste for displays of unorthodoxy, particularly by the counterculture. Someone else said there was within Mexico a campaign parallel to Operation Intercept at the border to stanch the flow of drugs among the Republic's youth.

They persuaded me that the image we were presenting to the public might just be provocative, but in San Francisco and Los Angeles I could not get much useful feedback on how we came across. Too many people in both cities have or affect some affiliation with the counterculture, so our relative weirdness

there was not great. Later, in rural California near the Arizona border, I did begin to see what sort of figure we were cutting, and it was reassuring. Our two cars rolled up to the Fruit and Plant Inspection Station, Andy's ahead, mine behind. The Inspector saw that we were together as I got out and walked up to where he was standing with Andy. The Inspector looked at us both a moment and said to Andy,

"Say, do you mind if I ask, what are you? I mean, I know you're a man, but what religion are you?"

"Jewish," Andy answered.

"Oh!" He seemed disappointed. "I thought you might be Mennonites."

We crossed the border without much ado a few days later. Still, as you may imagine, I was looking for trouble as we drove into Mexico. None developed, at least none of the sort we had been warned about. We rarely saw police outside of major cities, and those we saw just seemed amused and, when we asked, gave us good directions. Mexico on \$5 a Day allowed me expand the scope of my paranoia by warning us about the "almost universal dishonesty of Mexican gas stations . . . (that) work every fiddle their cynical little minds can devise;" but apparently they could not devise any for us. In fact, I only once felt the fury of a tourist trapped in a foreign jam. Although it must happen to lots of people driving south, the guide books never alerted us. Driving along the Camino Real, Route 15, the major artery linking the western United States with Mexico City, you first encounter an enormous black and white sign declaring a desviacion and directing you off the worn, narrow highway onto a rutted dirt track barely two cars wide. Traffic slows to five miles per hour, and it lasts sometimes half an hour. Sometimes the detour trap outdoes itself, in a way that may be uniquely Mexican. For instance, we were shunted off the Royal Road into a, by then, familiar desviacion in central Sinaloa. We followed the car ahead through clouds of dust and smoke thrown up by buses and trucks passing one another with abandon. Then the line slowed to a walk and we saw beside the road a white military tent, a van that looked like an ambulance, and a handful of people standing stiffly out front. The only man wore nondescript pants and shoes, a brown military tunic, and an officer's hat. The women wore ordinary dresses and white armbands marked with crude red crosses. One of them approached the car with a canister and smiled as she held it out to me. I knew what was expected. What the gas-station shysters miss, I suppose, the Red Cross leeches in donations. If it is the Red Cross.

Now, three months after I approached Mexico with apprehension, I can report that we have never been harrassed. In fact, with respect to our beards, I think that because of them we have had particularly warm interactions with Mexicans. Some village drunks here in Tepoztlan heckled us once, and someone in the Cuernavaca market hit Andy in the head with a nut, but that is the worst we have suffered. Waitresses and children have stroked my beard without embarrassment on several occasions; men have asked me in awe how long it took to grow. People we pass in the street react very distinctively, especially when I am walking ahead and Andy a little behind. As we approach, the adults see me and quickly alert their children. When I am near enough for eye-contact, the adults often avert their gaze, but the children gape unabashed. I say

"Buenos dias" or whatever and walk on by. Now there seems to be a moment when they get together and ask one another what to make of it. Then Andy comes by, quite unexpected, with another big, black beard and-- extremely rare in Latin-American man-- a grand bald head. The people in the street with us do a classic double-take and begin laughing out loud. Andy laughs and says hello. We have lots of contact with strangers that way.

So far, the warnings about the injustice of the Mexican legal system seem alarmist, too. I grew up with an image of law and order south of the border that came mostly from the adventures of the Cisco Kid and Pancho. The means employed were always comical and unpredictable, but justice was done in the end. Something of that spirit really does characterize the authorities here as I have found them. For example, Cuernavaca attracts hundreds of visitors each year to its foreign-language schools alone. CIDOC, a free university until recently directed by the revolutionary priest-intellectual Ivan Illitch, and CALL, a booming language and Latin-culture school founded by CIDOC dissidents, both offer six-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week Spanish courses that promise basic speaking ability within one month of study and fluency within three months. Because of the popularity of these schools with students from the United States, the city of Cuernavaca has come to be regarded as a meeting place for young Americans in Mexico. Not unconnected with this, I suspect, is the city's reputation as a distribution center for marijuana.

But Cuernavaca is also a favorite stopping place for moneyed, older Americans in retirement in Mexico, and a fashionable retreat for smog-choked, wealthy residents of Mexico City, just an hour to the north. Near the main squares of the city any evening, you can see well-heeled patrons of sidewalk cafes sipping coffee and liquers, while next door near the Burger Boy restaurant young Mexicans strike up conversations with passing American youth about grass and psychedelics. The police are nearby, rifles slung over their shoulders, standing in the shadow of a revolutionary statue. That looks like the kind of setup hip friends in the United States say Mexican authorities arrange to carry out their vendetta against American drug-traffickers. The winning young Mexican sells marijuana to a trusting tourist, then alerts the police, who arrest and jail the buyer.

In fact, I am told that the police and the Burger Boys do have a sort of understanding, but it is clearly not designed to entrap young Americans and send them off to rot in Mexican slammer. It just keeps the diverse interests of the people of the Cuernavaca centro from potential conflict. Police let the grass-vendors know that they will be arrested and prosecuted if they smoke cannabis in the main squares. It is the smoking, presumably, that would most alarm the cafe population. By this arrangement, all sorts of Americans go on enjoying Cuernavaca and spending dollars there.

The only harrassment I have heard of happened in the little village where we have been living while learning Spanish-- Tepoztlan. And the victim felt harrassed; you may not read it that way. He is a young American friend,

goodhearted and clean-shaven. One afternoon while he was shopping in the village marketplace with the one-year-old daughter of his Mexican girl-friend, a policeman came up and said that the President of the Municipio wanted a word with him. He picked up the baby and went to the President's office overlooking the market.

There he was told that according to municipal statutes he was guilty of allowing a child to be in the public square without clothing below her waist (she was wearing only a shirt). The President levied a fine of 50 pesos, to be paid at once. My friend protested that he was poor, that the square, after all, was already littered with the leavings of its large dog population, and anyway this child was toilet-trained, more or less. She had never worn diapers, had been gradually taught to go outdoors if she was indoors, and out of sight when in a public place. (The baby fussed alot during this part of the interview.) The President listened unmoved and asked his assistant to bring in the law for the young man to read. Suddenly the baby stopped fussing and, in a rare lapse, soiled the floor of the President's office, ending the argument conclusively. My friend still thinks the fine was cruel and unusual.

As we get ready to move further south, we hear that no one with long hair or beard is allowed to cross into Guatemala. I will let you know.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

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