

Running with the Fox

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“PRESIDENT VICENTE FOX is coming to town and the Mexican Consulate wants an interpreter to be available just in case. Are you interested?” Well, of course I said yes, I’d be delighted. So on a chilly morning in November I put on my best suit and presented myself at the Four Seasons Hotel.

I was introduced to Colonel Palacios, who would be my contact throughout the day. The Colonel was with the President’s security team and at that point he and his people were making sure every member of the press corps was thoroughly screened before entering the room where President Fox would be having breakfast with local dignitaries. Reporters laid their cameras and tape recorders on the carpeted floor of the outer reception area and stood back while two specialists and a German shepherd checked (and sniffed) the equipment extremely thoroughly. There was an invigorating sense of anticipation in the air.

The buzz of conversation was suddenly muted, and the President and First Lady of Mexico came strolling through the crowd, holding hands. He is six foot five and carries his height elegantly. She is petite and lively. Smiling and nodding, they were ushered into the banquet area. I made eye contact with Colonel Palacios: should I accompany the President? He shook his head in a way that made me realize I was in for a long day of just hanging around.

After breakfast everyone was suddenly racing for the exits. The President was whisked out to his limousine and his entourage scrambled to get into the sixteen vehicles that would follow him everywhere he went. I was assigned to a black suburban and barely managed to clamber aboard

before we were off. The motorcade had a police escort of fifty two motorcycles, and we roared through Austin at high speed. The police raced ahead and stationed themselves at every intersection so that traffic lights wouldn’t slow us down, and as I looked through the windshield I could see an avenue of flashing red and blue lights disappearing into the distance. Riding in a presidential motorcade is an exhilarating way to travel.

Our first stop was at the new Mexican Consulate where, with the smell of fresh paint still in the air and a marimba playing in the background, the President cut the ribbon and declared the offices open. He towered above everyone else, and yet when he shook hands with people and spoke to them he seemed to be on their level. Throughout the day he never missed an opportunity to speak to the many Mexicans who thronged to see him, and his questions always seemed perfectly relevant to their situation: “Are they treating you well on the Mexican side of the border when you go home?” “Is your family receiving the money you send them?” “Are you able to work with dignity?” “A photograph? Of course, why not?”

From there we went to the Capitol, where the President met with the Governor of Texas and other elected officials, and they all huddled for a private meeting. Once again the Colonel shook his head at me: no, the President doesn’t need your services right now. So I stepped outside and joined a group of men who were part of the presidential inner circle. One was a three-star general who oversaw all the logistical details of the President’s travel plans and schedules. The second was the presidential doctor

(with his little black bag), and the third was in charge of protocol. Like me, these three had no specific job to perform right then, so we spent a most agreeable time chatting on the back steps of the Capitol.

Then there was the usual mad dash to get to the vehicles and we roared off back to the hotel for lunch. During the meal, President Fox addressed the assembled local business leaders, speaking in English as I stood idly by. He mentioned that other countries were now challenging Mexico’s low-cost assembly plants for a slice of the American manufacturing pie, but cautioned that, “not everything that shines is gold.” If I’d been interpreting, I would have said “glitters” instead of “shines” but that’s just a quibble because his English is excellent. He also explained that Mexicans living in the United States send home fourteen billion dollars a year in remittances, contributing more to the Mexican economy than either oil or tourism revenues. By implication, the US economy obviously reaps a substantial benefit from this demographic group as well, a point that was not lost on this Texas audience.

After lunch we went to the LBJ Library for some public speeches and private conversations. By this time I was feeling quite comfortable in my role as one of the entourage, and was exchanging business cards and accepting invitations to come to Mexico City to visit Los Pinos, the presidential residence. And then it was time for the President to fly back to Mexico. He never really needed me at all, but I really didn’t mind. I wouldn’t have missed the experience for anything. ★