



At The Summit

I was nervous and trying not to show it. Nervous from the moment I arrived at the rendezvous in Waco, Texas to the moment I stood at a podium to interpret for President Vicente Fox of Mexico at the press conference following his summit meeting with President George W. Bush at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas.

At the appointed time—everything was done on a very precise schedule—we were whisked away in a small caravan of black SUVs with tinted windows. I sat beside Mr. Bush's personal interpreter. The rest of the crew consisted mainly of serious young men in black suits with wires attached to their ears. Our documents were meticulously checked against a master list. Colossal concrete beams, of the sort used to support highway overpasses, had been laid in a sort of herringbone pattern crisscrossing the long avenue approaching the ranch, forcing vehicles to creep forward, zigzagging slowly through the maze.

There was a reception house where we waited until summoned. I was still nervous, and the waiting was difficult. But then it was time, and I took my place behind a podium in the sunshine, looking across a stretch of gravel to where the presidents stood. The mood was ranch casual, and they were both dressed in jeans, boots, and open-necked shirts. There were open fields behind them, with a couple of horses grazing in the distance. Camera crews from U.S. and Mexican TV channels were stationed a little behind me and to my left. The two leaders were to talk about immigration, border security, trade, and other weighty topics. It was March 6, 2004, during President Bush's first term. He spoke first and his interpreter repeated his words in Spanish. Then it was Mr. Fox's turn. I was no longer nervous and focused all my attention on him.

President Fox speaks excellent English, but he chose to speak in Spanish so that his remarks could be carried live on Mexican television. I was there to provide an English version of those remarks for Mr. Bush and his people that could also be used as a soundtrack when the press conference was broadcast in the U.S. There are two main

modes of interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive. In the simultaneous mode, which is used at places like the United Nations and international events of all kinds, the interpreter hears the speaker through headphones and delivers an instant translation through a microphone to those who need it. This is a nerve-wracking process that requires total concentration and the ability to operate in two languages at the same time.

In consecutive mode, which is equally nerve-wracking, the interpreter listens to the speech and then, when the speaker pauses, provides a translation of everything he or she has said. Ideally, the speaker delivers a few sentences then pauses to allow the interpreter to relay them in the other language. The longer the speaker speaks, the harder it is for the interpreter to convey a full and accurate translation. The professional interpreter carries a notebook and uses a variety of shorthand strategies to keep track of what's being said. This mode also requires total concentration.

President Fox talked for a couple of minutes, which is a long time in these circumstances. Then he paused and nodded at me. As I spoke, I scanned my notes, which gave me the details I needed to thread his message into coherent phrases. Then he started again. He spoke for about ten minutes all together, pausing here and there as we developed our rhythm and I became more familiar with his style and delivery. As he spoke I mentally "filmed" what he was talking about so that, when I was speaking, I could replay the video in my mind to help me reproduce the sequence of his various points.

When the speeches were over, the presidents walked away to join their wives for a tour of the ranch in a white pickup truck with Mr. Bush at the wheel. I and the other interpreter, a charming lady from Argentina, adjourned to the reception house to relax. As usual after an assignment of this kind, I felt the emotional let-down following the adrenalin rush of the interpretation. After a while I boarded an SUV and was ferried back to my real world.