

Confusion

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In the film *The American President*, the President confronts a brutal fall in popularity and a strong contender who saturates the media. Confused, the President says that people have the right to listen to whom they want. Lewis Rothschild, his assistant, answers him: The people, “they don’t have a choice! [The contender] is the only one doing the talking! People want leadership, Mr. President, and in the absence of genuine leadership, they’ll listen to anyone who steps up to the microphone. They want leadership. They’re so thirsty for it they’ll crawl through the desert toward a mirage, and when they discover there’s no water they’ll drink the sand.” President Andrew Shepherd finally responds that “People don’t drink the sand ‘cause they’re thirsty. They don’t drink the sand because they don’t know the difference...”

All presidents, in the world, in every country, assume the office to save their respective nation and, sooner or later, become bogged down by the reality, which obligates them to rework their objectives. Some respond with astuteness, like Bill Clinton; others act savagely as in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Some succeed in transforming themselves, others end up collapsing.

The government of President Peña arrived at the zenith of his project at the end of 2013; thenceforth began his fall. Despite the assertiveness of his initial performance, in reality he did not have a flight plan beyond the legislative approval of a series of reforms that were passed in record time. Once that threshold was traversed, the government left the implementation of those reforms to the individuals responsible for each of the respective areas to decide on them. Peña’s true plan was not the reforms, but rather the recreation of an imperial government, in the manner of the fifties and sixties of the past century. That is, the project was the government and nothing more.

The problem was two-pronged: on the one hand, it was impossible to create anew what no longer existed and that had disappeared because it was not functioning. On the other hand, on presenting himself as the sole mortal responsible for everything that happened in the country, the President ended up taking on all of the problems that arose: from Ayotzinapa to corrupt governors. His aloofness relayed him to the gallows and he did not know how to respond. Worse: in the face of his incapacity to understand the nature of the problem, rather than building a way out, he continued to dig himself deeper into the hole in which he found himself.

The form of his leading the government reminds me of an anecdote that a friend related to me: “Many years ago, in my college years, I attended an experimental theater presentation that, I believe, was called “Chaos on the Stage”. It was a parody of an orchestra director who could not define which work to interpret. Thus, all of the first interpreters [for example, the First Violin] tried to convince him of which score to play, that in which the individual’s instrument would appear to greatest advantage and, to prove it, there were small selections of the recommended pieces heard on playback. Because the director was unable to decide, the pressures of the first interpreters and of the music that they endorsed began to

accelerate until the play concluded in utter stage and auditory chaos.” That is what the government seems like, with dissonant speeches, unconnected actions and, above all, a total absence of clarity of course.

What Mexicans require is certainty of the future, something for which many of the reforms can be highly relevant. However, the presidential discourse is totally alien to that citizen demand and, as the film passage evokes, the only person attempting to provide that certainty is the contender, who is doing so, and what’s more, with enormous skill.

The crucial question involves what the President can do to avoid an uncontrollable crisis at the end of his term, just when the months of frank downturn of presidential power set in. First, the president has nothing to lose in that his popularity is so low that it can only go up. To date, he has exclusively accomplished one essential thing that will allow the avoidance of a crisis yet greater than what now seems inevitable: on correcting the fiscal aggregates, his government has dramatically reduced the risk of a new crisis.

In the political ambit, it would be much better for him to stop attempting to manipulate the electoral processes that are underway, in that everything will revert against him. Similarly, he should dedicate himself to all Mexicans and not only to his party brethren or pals: each governor whom he protects becomes an additional burden that he must shoulder; it would be better for each to face up to his own deeds (and crimes).

Finally, the country encounters a phenomenal challenge in the relationship with the U.S., which changes continually and that has become eminently unpredictable. The population has been absolutely willing to join forces with the President in this process, but he has shown himself to be partisan and has not taken advantage of the largest source of strength that there is in the face of the U.S.: the innumerable daily contacts that exist between Mexicans and Americans for business, family relations, exports, imports and every species of exchange that the government does not control, thus rendering these connections more legitimate. If the President desires to emerge from the hole in which he finds himself he has to start to add and add more and more.

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