

AMERICAN EMBASSY

MEXICO, D. F.

Memorandum of Conversation

UNCLASSIFIED

DATE: September 23, 1968

AC

SUBJECT: George Denney's Conversation with Victor Urquidi

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PARTICIPANTS: Victor Urquidi, Rector of Colegio de Mexico  
George Denney, Deputy Director of INR  
Morris Rothenberg, First Secretary of Embassy

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1. A two hour lunch with Dr. Victor Urquidi, Rector of the elite Colegio de Mexico, covered principally the youth question and Dr. Urquidi's decidedly strong views on the government's handling of the situation. Dr. Urquidi was sharply critical of the government and President Diaz Ordaz for having ordered army seizure of the National University (UNAM). He described the reaction of his own institution as one of complete opposition to the government. He said that the participation of his organization in the student strike had been little and late, mostly taking the form of offers to help out if requested by the National Strike Committee (CNH) or joining the various marches. The Colegio had two students on the CNH (both of whom were at the university when the army took over) and two faculty members who served only as observers on the Coalicion de Maestros, refusing full participation in the latter body because they had some doubts about its composition.

2. Very much on Urquidi's mind was the machinegunning of the Colegio by unknown assailants at 3 a.m. on September 20. No one had been hurt although the building's watchman escaped only by luck. More than 100 bullet holes were found afterwards on the premises including two holes through Urquidi's chair in his office. Urquidi attributed the act to the extreme rightwing student organization MURO which he felt had the tacit cooperation if not the active encouragement of the police, the army, or other elements within the government. He saw as the major motive for the action a desire to frighten and punish the Colegio for its participation in the student movement, small as it had been.

3. Dr. Urquidi was also quite bitter about police attitudes toward the bombing of his institution as well as about the police and judicial system as a whole. He thought the police should have left guards at the Colegio after the bombing but they refused to do so. And in fact, he has hired private detectives both as guards and to investigate the incident. He speculated that if it had been leftist extremists

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who had bombed the Colegio, investigation would have been rapid and effective but was skeptical that those responsible for bombing the Colegio as well as a number of secondary schools would be apprehended. In general, he painted a completely black picture of the police system as completely corrupt. No one would go to the police unless he absolutely had to; the openness of bribery illustrated the low estate of the system as well as the low equality of those who went into it.

4. In a more general discussion of the reasons for student unrest, Dr. Urquidi made the following points. One source of dissatisfaction is the low standard of the educational system. But another substantial group of students oppose any effort to improve the system since they want an easy road to a degree. This latter group is often at the head of demonstrations against teachers who they consider too hard. Dr. Urquidi acknowledged that in the current situation, extremist groups had influenced the students, noting for example that initial student demands had been linked specifically to the events of late July but that subsequently political demands had been added to these. At the same time, he saw the willingness of students to respond to the political demands as part of an underlying cynicism that underlay student attitudes to the Mexican political system. He noted that even secondary students had traveled considerably throughout Mexico ~~city~~, something which had not been the case when Urquidi himself went to school. They could see, he said, the extent of poverty in Mexico, the iniquities of the tax system and therefore had come to the conclusion that the Mexican Revolution, and official claims for it, was a lie. Students were aware of government control of the communications media and this only reinforced the feeling that the system was replete with hypocrisy..

5. Another underlying factor mentioned by Dr. Urquidi was the extremely rapid growth in the number of students. He noted, for example, that there is a 17 percent annual growth of secondary schools. What has happened, then, is a heavy influx of poorly educated, immature students into the system which together with the above mentioned factors creates the soil for student irresponsibility and unrest. Dr. Urquidi felt investment in higher education was woefully inadequate.

Embassy Comment:

The most striking aspect of Dr. Urquidi's remarks was his willingness to air his bitterness especially against the President before a visitor whom he was meeting only for the first time. Dr. Urquidi in the past has been critical of certain aspects of Mexican developments but has seen his role as one of alerting the authorities to potential dangers and suggesting possible remedies. He has been very much interested in the possibilities of birth control (noting also on this occasion government sensitivity about getting involved) and tax reform (about which he expounded at length). At the same time, he has always put his criticism into a brighter context and did also during the present conversation stress that Mexican economic development was proceeding extremely well. However, it was obvious that the university situation was uppermost on his mind, and his own attitude clearly reflects a mood which currently is gripping the entire academic community.

Cleared with Mr. Denney (in draft)  
POL:MRothenberg:sd