Salinity Crisis in the Borderlands:
The Mexicali Campesino’s Fight for Colorado River Water in the Delta, 1961-1973

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Translation of Genocidio Text: “The United States of America, contaminating the waters of the Colorado River, annihilate 300,000 human beings of the Mexicali Valley.”

Note on Genocidio Text: This text appeared as a stamp on a letter of protest sent by the Liga Agraria Estatal of Mexicali, a campesino advocacy group, to 5,000 foreign ambassadors living throughout the Mexican nation.
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To the entire Pizzigoni Thesis Crew, whose camaraderie carried me through the darkest hours,

To my wonderful parents Michael Gottlieb & Wendy Gordon and to my Andy,

I am forever grateful.
**Acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AF</td>
<td>acre-feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOS</td>
<td>United States Department of State</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCI</td>
<td>Campesina Central Independiente</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRLC</td>
<td>Colorado River Land Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Confederación de Trabajadores de México</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEW</td>
<td>Department of Health, Education, and Welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBWC/CILA</td>
<td>International Boundary Water Commission/Comisión Internacional de Limites y Aguas</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAFY</td>
<td>million-acre-feet-per-year</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLN</td>
<td>Movimiento de Liberación Nacional</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOC</td>
<td>Memorandum of Conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NACP</td>
<td>The National Archives at College Park, Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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<tr>
<td>ppm</td>
<td>parts-per-million</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCM</td>
<td>Partido Comunista Mexicano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RG</td>
<td>Research Group</td>
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<td>WRCA</td>
<td>Water Resources Collection and Archives</td>
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Introduction

Ya lo verá. ¡Como nos vamos a hacer ricos! Mira, todas esas tierras no tienen dueño y aunque son puros terregales poniéndole ganas pronto se convertirán en praderas verdes…serán productivas. ¡Que caray! El Río, en menos de veinte años será floreciente. ¡Ya los verá Juan…! ¡Ya lo veremos todos…!

“You will see! All of us will see!” Tío Isaac tells his nephew Juan in the historical fiction novel El Río: Cronología de Mexicali. El Río, Juan ponders the name and then in a flash the mighty Colorado River lays bare and wild before him. Enrique Estrada Barrera crests a wave of authors who sought to record early pioneer memories of Mexicali, a border settlement in the northeast corner of Baja California, Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century. Barrera begins with the tale of Juan, a youngster traveling with his uncle across the vast desert to reach the only hope for prosperity in the arid region, the Colorado River.

The “Nile of the West” begins its course in Colorado, winding through the seven U.S. Basin States, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, California, and Arizona, before crossing the international border into Baja California, Mexico. The Colorado River Delta refers to this lowermost region, south of the border. Once home of the Cocopah Indians who survived as subsistence farmers growing gourds and melons on the fertile banks of the Colorado, the Delta now faces one of the greatest ecological troubles of the West; as Colorado River flows decrease, the land returns to desert. Because of the

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1 “You will see! How we will get rich! Look, all of these lands are unclaimed and, although they are putting
2 To further clarify, the seven U.S. Basin States consist of all U.S. states through which the Colorado River flows. Each of these seven states receives a portion of Colorado River water per year. The Basin States are divided into Upper Basin and Lower Basin States. The Upper Basin consists of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and New Mexico and the Lower Basin consist of Nevada, Arizona, and California.
4 The Colorado used to end in the Gulf of California but no longer does so because of recued flows. This presents a severe problem not only for individuals living and farming in the region but for wildlife dependent on the river and associated wetlands.
vital role the Colorado has played in this region since turn of the century settlement, the Delta has served as an economic and political battlefield between agrarian communities across state and international borders. The Delta provides the scene for this thesis about the Salinity Crisis, a diplomatic imbroglio over the water of the Colorado River that dominated international relations between the United States and Mexico from 1961 to 1973.

When Juan and Tío Isaac would have arrived to what would later become Mexicali, the river was strong and all Tío Isaac could think about was how to tame this liquid gold, making farmland out of desert and his fortune. The fictional Tío Isaac would not have been the first with this idea; by the time families like his arrived the “gringos” to the north had already begun irrigating the Colorado and investing in what would eventually become one of California’s strongest agricultural centers, the Imperial Valley.\(^5\)

It is this pioneer spirit, nationalistic borderland competition and engineering craft that shape the narrative of the Salinity Crisis.\(^6\) This story begins roughly sixty years after the founding of Mexicali\(^7\) when an international treaty governed irrigation systems on both sides of the border and the Mexicali Valley almost equaled the Imperial Valley in agricultural strength. The Colorado River Compact of 1922 divvied up yearly

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\(^6\) The maxim “first in time, first in right” (1872) defined water apportionment in the American West before interstate and international agreements. This principle falls under prior appropriation doctrine, that is, water is allocated based on who first puts the source to beneficial use. This differs from the doctrine of riparian right, that is, water rights are determined based on the property rights to the land adjacent to the source. “First in time, first in right” heightened the intensity of competition over water in the arid West and the Colorado River Delta between American states and between the United States and Mexico. Opponents labored to put as much Colorado River water to use as possible before their rivals to gain economic advantage. This incentivized rapid development without concern for long-term sustainability. On this see: Lawrence J. MacDonnell and Sarah F. Bates, ed. *Natural Resources Policy and Law: Trends and Directions* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993); Norris Hundley, Jr., *Water and the West* (Berkeley, California: University Press, 1975); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

\(^7\) Mexicali was officially founded in 1903.
apportionments of Colorado River water between the seven U.S. Basin States. However, Mexico, excluded from the Compact, did not secure a stable allotment of river water until the 1944 Mexican Water Treaty,\(^8\) which established that the United States must deliver 1.5 MAFY (million-acre-feet-per-year) of water to Mexico.\(^9\) The Treaty also increased the powers of the International Boundary & Water Commission/Comisión Internacional de Limites y Aguas (IBWC/CILA) with U.S. and Mexican components to ensure water-sharing practices acceptable to those on both sides of the border.\(^{10}\)

In 1960, irrigation practice on the lower Colorado River drastically changed, testing the constraints of the Mexican Water Treaty and creating the biggest diplomatic dispute between Mexico and the United States since the 1938 oil expropriations.\(^{11}\) Ultimately, the advocacy of peasant farmers or *campesinos* in the Mexicali Valley, those most directly affected by this Colorado River water crisis, forced both the U.S. and Mexican governments to engage in solution-finding negotiations. The final resolution to the crisis in 1973 largely favored Mexican interests because of sustained *campesino* activism for over a decade. This seldom discussed history is remarkable not only for what it reveals about U.S.-Mexican relations during the tumultuous years of the 1960s-70s but also for the unconventional principal actors, the Mexicali peasant farmers, responsible for shaping its outcome.

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\(^8\) The United States refused to recognize several Mexican governments in the years following the Mexican Revolution, citing the large amounts of uncompensated damage of U.S. property. The seven U.S. Basin States used this to justify excluding Mexico from the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

\(^9\) Almost all of the 1.5 MAFY of Colorado River water received by Mexico went to Mexicali. A small portion served as potable water for the cities of Mexicali and Tijuana, but the majority was used to irrigate Mexicali agriculture.

\(^{10}\) The IBWC/CILA in its first form was created by the Convention of 1889 between the United States and Mexico, which delineated the water boundaries between the two nations.

\(^{11}\) In 1938, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated all foreign-owned oil businesses and related infrastructures, many of which were American owned. This provoked the international boycott of Mexican products; T. R. Martin to George C. McGee, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, “Proposed Delay in Study of Salinity Problem on Colorado River,” April 26, 1962, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322, 521.1, Microfilm Reel #12.
In the decades leading up to the aforementioned crisis, serious ecological problems began to threaten the sustainability of both the Yuma Valley and the Mexicali Valley, agricultural communities based in the exhaustive irrigation of desert soils. In the Yuma Valley, the high salinity of many water supplies used for irrigation threatened to reduce crop yields, forcing farmers to look for alternative means to preserve the purity of their water supplies. In the mid-1930s, Yuma Valley agriculturalists began to use groundwaters from underground aquifers to irrigate their lands when well waters they had been utilizing began to dry up.\textsuperscript{12} However, “without adequate drainage or sufficient rainfall, the increasing level of toxic salts eventually made the recycled groundwater harmful to crops.”\textsuperscript{13} To combat salt pollution, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation District began pumping the highly saline groundwater from the underground aquifers and replacing the supply with fresh Colorado water as part of the Gila Project.\textsuperscript{14}

However, in efforts to save their community, the Yuma Valley’s practices began directly injuring another, just across the southern borderline. The Bureau of Reclamation deposited the wastewaters, extracted from highly saline underground aquifers, just below Yuma intake points but just above the Morelos Dam, the pivotal point of intake for the last users of Colorado River water, Mexican farmers. The Mexicali farmers, cultivating

\textsuperscript{12} Evan R. Ward, “The Irrigated Oasis: Transformation of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2000), 92-93; In 1935, the Coolidge Dam was completed and the Gila River no longer had enough water to replenish the underground wells agriculturalists had been using.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 93; Waters originating from underground aquifers contained 4,000 ppm of salt before dilution.

\textsuperscript{14} The Gila Project, authorized in 1937, laid the groundwork for Yuma wastewater practices. The Gila Project was not immediately supported but local Arizona spokesmen fought bitterly to preserve Yuma Valley agriculture. Evan R. Ward explores this topic in Chapter 3 of Border Oasis. Ward writes an expert on water use, Dr. Harlan H. Barrows offered the following as solutions to the Yuma salinity issue: Colorado River water could be imported, farmers could move, or the Bureau of Reclamation “could simply leave the...area to the inevitable conclusion of present trends,” this third option being re-desertification. However, the aggressive efforts of Arizona leaders “push[ed] for development and the preservation of existing property rights obscure[ing] more critical questions about the capacity of the land...to sustain large-scale agricultural production;” Ward, Border Oasis, 50-53.
primarily cotton and wheat in the state of Baja California, Mexico, sustained roughly 400,000 inhabitants in the state’s capital city by the early 1960s. Uninformed of Yuma’s new wastewater practices, Mexican farmers were suddenly faced with the frightening circumstance of stunted or dying crops with no immediate idea as to why. Mexicali waters dramatically went from 800 ppm (parts-per-million) of salt content to 1,500 ppm annually.\textsuperscript{15}

Shortly after Yuma began these wastewater practices, Mexicali farmers identified the increased salinity of waters as the cause of declining crop yields. Mexicali farmers were outraged and the Mexican Government launched a formal complaint to the United States. Farmers south of the border felt the Yuma practices were not only a direct threat to their livelihoods but also an attempt by the United States to take advantage of Mexico as the less powerful country for the benefit of U.S. agriculture. Mexicali farmers refused to accept what they considered to be inequity and waged a grassroots war of protest that engaged the entire country and quickly reached even the Oval Office. U.S. officials justified Yuma’s actions, referring back to the Mexican Water Treaty of 1944 which guaranteed Mexico 1.5 MAFY of water. This treaty specified the \textit{quantity} of water the United States owed Mexico but not the \textit{quality} of that water. The Mexican public and representatives fiercely denied this reading of the Treaty, demanding their water quota be usable and not highly saline.

\textsuperscript{15} Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior, “Introduction” of \textit{Resolution of the United States-Mexico Colorado river Salinity Problem, Special Report: Negotiations with Involved Water User Organizations in the United States, August 1973 Boulder City Draft} (Boulder City, Colorado: August 17, 1973), WRCA, Milton N. Nathanson papers, Carton 2, Folder 42, 1-9; In October of 1962, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) concluded that the highly saline wastewaters were in fact “pollution;” Ward, \textit{Border Oasis}, 75.
The ensuing battle to survive salinity became the top priority issue of international diplomacy between the United States and Mexico for over a decade. Yuma Valley and Mexicali Valley farmers argued bitterly over Colorado River water from 1961 until the formal resolution of the crisis in 1973 with Minute 242 which guaranteed Mexico a certain quality of water. Agriculturalists on both sides of the border engaged their senators, governors, engineers, and presidents in this debate. This thesis will connect the diplomatic exchange between high-ranking officials on both sides of the border to the grassroots movements of Mexicali campesinos and the regional Colorado River water wars in an effort to clarify the immediate significance of the Salinity Crisis (1961-1973) as well as situate this moment within global events, demonstrating its broader legacy.

This work argues that Mexicali campesinos, through visible protest and engagement of the Mexican and U.S. governments in the debate over salinity, forced the initiation of the serious diplomatic exchange necessary to resolve the crisis. Because of Mexico’s role as a third party to the Cold War, the strongly voiced anti-Americanism of Mexicali protestors caused the United States to fear losing Mexico as an ally against the encroachment of communism in the Western Hemisphere. The sustained pressure of Mexicali campesino advocacy throughout the 1960s secured that the Salinity Crisis would remain the critical policy issue between the United States and Mexico into the early 1970s. Mexicali campesinos, a historically disadvantaged population, successfully changed the course of U.S.-Mexico relations in the 1960s-70s, becoming the focal point of diplomatic exchange between the nations at the height of the Cold War and ultimately enhancing Mexican water rights to the Colorado River.
The international political climate set the context for the crisis. John F. Kennedy took office on January 20, 1961, just two years after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, a critical turning point in U.S.-Latin American relations. Despite the “Good Neighbor” policy initiated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 that promised non-intervention and non-interference in Latin American countries, Kennedy defined his early presidential career with the failed CIA-supported attack on the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 followed by the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Just a month prior to the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Kennedy had proposed the Alliance for Progress, an offer of economic partnership between the United States and Latin American countries to “build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom.”

Kennedy not only hoped to gain economic partners with the Alliance for Progress but more importantly democratic allies to prevent the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere.

Mexico represented a third party interest in the political and ideological struggle between the United States and the Eastern Bloc. The United States, therefore, faced the challenge of creating a unified Western Hemisphere rooted in capitalist democracy without being perceived as bully who imposed its vision of world order on Mexico. With the memory of the Mexican Revolution still very much alive, the Mexican government and public supported the Cuban Revolution and Castro’s regime. Mexico sustained positive relations with the United States but also maintained ties with Cuba for six years after all other members of the Organization of American States (OAS) severed their ties.

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with Cuba in 1964.\textsuperscript{17} This dual relationship gave Mexico leverage in its relations with both the United States and Cuba. Mexico became a go-between for the United States and the U.S.S.R., democracy and communism, western and eastern power. Any event that shook the U.S.-Mexican friendship was therefore perceived as a threat to Western freedom and U.S. world dominance.

The Salinity Crisis did just that. Suddenly, a discourse of “anti-imperialism” flooded the Mexicali Valley, a shift that alarmed not only high-ranking officials but also the general constituency of the United States, specifically those who lived in the border regions of Southern Arizona and California. Many regular citizens, in addition to local farmers and engineers, sent distressed letters to their senators, governors, and the White House, insisting the United States do something to ameliorate the situation lest communists take over the Mexicali Valley.\textsuperscript{18} The Los Angeles Times reported on March 17, 1963:

\begin{quote}
MEXICALI – The Colorado – which means reddish – River has brought a flow of left-wing extremists and Communists to Baja California in recent months…[the river] has brought this flow of Reds because it has supplied two things essential for Marxist propaganda: unrest among the lower working classes and anti-Americanism.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The degree to which communist forces were directly involved in \textit{campesino} protests is difficult to discern. Several Mexican political entities, namely the government-controlled agrarian union Campesina Central Independiente (CCI) and the political party

\textsuperscript{17} Christopher M. White, \textit{Creating a Third World: Mexico, Cuba, and the United States during the Castro Era} (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 49.
\textsuperscript{18} For example, Engineer Spence McIntyre of International Engineering wrote frequently to the Department of State urging the Federal Government to find a fast solution to the Salinity Crisis. Engineer McIntyre often included clippings from local newspaper, many from the Los Angeles Times. The articles included the current state and political complications of the crisis with a focus on the growing communist influence in Mexicali; NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322.
Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) were leftist organizations with undoubtedly some socialist and communist members and Castro supporters. Such organizations had vested interest in the Salinity Crisis and often worked with local Mexicali leaders to organize anti-American protests. However, the goal of this thesis is not to establish the extent to which communist organizations and ideologies took sway of Mexicali and threatened democracy in the borderlands. It is, instead, to understand how the perceived peril of communism at the southern border shook the American public and the offices of Washington, forcing the U.S. Federal Government to respond with urgency to the crisis.

Despite officials’ early attempts to deflect responsibility for the Salinity Crisis, the atmosphere of international politics in the early 1960s transformed a preoccupation of farmers and engineers into a matter of U.S. national security. From 1961 until 1973, the U.S. Government faced the challenge of maintaining peaceable relations with Mexico by taking responsibility for the crisis without undermining Arizona’s economic interests.

**Historiography**

The history of the Colorado River Delta falls within the recent scholarly trend of borderlands history, roughly the study of the political, economic, social/cultural, and environmental interactions between communities along national borderlines. Largely ignored, the Delta’s history is little more than 100 years old. There are a few topics in the chronicle of the Delta that have received special scholarly attention. One is the early U.S.

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20 The MLN became increasingly communist in the years just before the Salinity Crisis with the support of former president and member of the Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM) or the Mexican Communist Party Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas also founded the CCI in 1963. Still, the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), nearly eradicated the power of the PCM with a raid on the party’s national office in 1958 and the suppression of a PCM-led railroad strike. Therefore, the PCM had too little power and political backing to truly have played a large role in Mexicali campesino protests; White, *Creating a Third World*, 55; Columbia University, Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, *Partido Comunista Mexicano records, 1951-1958*. 
filibuster settlement, which defined growth on both sides of the border into the beginning decades of the 1900s. Another addresses the legislative milestones of the 1922 Colorado River Compact and the 1944 Mexican Water Treaty.

The few works that address the Salinity Crisis itself spend little more than ten pages on this crucial moment in the history of both the Colorado River and international relations between the United States and Mexico. Most offer short synopses of the crisis and highlight the key figures, dates, and pieces of legislation that led to its resolution. Such works are often more general histories of water in the American West, including works by noted scholars Norris Hundley, Jr., and Marc Reisner. Of the works that delve into the specifics of this water war, most do so unilaterally, focusing on U.S. actions at the national level. Mexican national politics and, most significantly, campesino involvement are given more weight in Mexican historiographies but remain peripheral to U.S. historiographies. For example, Phillip L. Fradkin, in his work *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West*, lends one sentence to campesino mobilization, though he details very well the Nixon administration’s role in the Salinity Crisis.

Mexican historiography is even more limited but does give sizable attention to Mexicali campesino efforts, though more so to memorialize the story of the farmers within the greater Mexican narrative of popular protest and the legacy of the Mexican Revolution. These works also often champion the Mexican Federal Government for its

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21 A filibuster settlement in this context refers to a settlement of U.S. frontiersmen established through illegal means, sometimes including military aggression, in Mexican territories. U.S. filibusters also occupied territories in the American West as well. The act of “filibustering” is an extension of “Manifest Destiny” philosophy, which validates unchecked U.S. expansionism.


ultimate support of the Mexicali effort. Celso Aguirre Bernal’s *Compendio histórico-biográfico de Mexicali, 1539-1966* does just this. While these histories reveal much about how the Mexican people remember the crisis and viewed the events of the crisis as they transpired, they rarely examine the actions of Mexicali *campesinos* and the Mexican Federal Government with greater profundity. Mexican historiographies tend to erroneously give equal weight to the impact of the Mexican Federal Government and *campesino* activism in shaping the outcome of the Salinity Crisis. Historiographies exaggerate the overall role of the Mexican Federal Government and its support of *campesino* protests especially in the earliest years of the crisis. I will demonstrate that Mexicali *campesino* activism proved the most significant determining factor in the fate of Mexico’s Colorado River water allotment, despite the flattering portrayal of the Federal Government in Mexican historiography.

Evan R. Ward’s work, *Border Oasis: Water and the Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta, 1940-1975*, is overall the most comprehensive work of historiography on the Salinity Crisis. Ward presents a fairly inclusive portrait of the crisis and particularly succeeds in illuminating the regional political landscapes of Arizona and the Mexicali Valley. Ward argues, “Arizona officials played a leading role in the environmental imbroglio that eventually soured international relations,” a subject marginalized in the works of other historians. However, Ward fails to connect *campesino* mobilization to the advancements in international diplomacy that eventually resolved the

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25 Ward, *Border Oasis*.
26 Ibid., 45.
crisis; Ward focuses on the successes of one *campesino* leader, Alfonso Garzón, but overlooks the effects of large-scale demonstrations on U.S. policies.

Further, no researchers have used the presidential archives of the John F. Kennedy to understand how *campesino* protest provoked some of the most significant advances in the resolution of the crisis by engaging Kennedy. In conclusion, few experts address the Salinity Crisis bi-nationally and most ignore the direct impact of *campesino* efforts on international diplomacy. In an effort to combat this trend, which leaves critical holes in the study of the Salinity Crisis, this work aims to shed light on the essentiality of *campesino* protest. In doing so, this thesis unifies the efforts of local grassroots demonstration to the world events that informed U.S.-Mexico relations in these years.
I. A Tradition of Popular Protest: the Mexicali Campesino

This first chapter begins by situating the Salinity Crisis within Mexicali history, addressing the pivotal role of the campesino in the political and social evolution of the Mexicali Valley. This chapter then focuses on the actions of Mexicali campesinos and their political representatives in the first four months of the Salinity Crisis, namely October 1961 through January 1962. In order to understand the Salinity Crisis as a watershed moment of international diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico, one must first understand the significance of the crisis internally, within the larger historical narratives of the Mexicali community and the Mexican nation.

Who Was the Mexicali Campesino?

Born of the Mexican Revolution, Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution declared all lands and natural resources within Mexico’s borders property of the Mexican government and people. This article legalized the expropriation of any lands and resources owned by foreign companies and individuals and also outlined a land redistribution program.\(^{27}\) Of the many reasons for rebellion among the Mexican people, one of the strongest arguments for new leadership was the exploitation of the campesino. Hacendados, or wealthy large landowners, particularly during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (roughly 1876-1911), frequently and illegally absorbed campesino lands, enlarging their wealth and power at the expense of the unrepresented majority. In order to curb such manipulation, Article 27 ratified a new pattern of land allotment aimed at breaking down large land holdings and designating a plot of land within communally owned ejidos for

each campesino and his family. This pattern of land use, known as the “Ejido System,” became an integral part of governmental land use policy focused on the peasant and subsistence cultivation.

However, at the time of the Revolution, Mexicali and what would later become the state of Baja California were sparsely populated with very few settlements. Additionally, despite the 1917 Constitution, Mexican governmental policy maintained a heavily Porfirian approach to economics, struggling for self-definition after the bloody and tumultuous years of the revolution. Economically weak, the government favored foreign investment and sought to protect externally owned companies rather than expropriate lands and natural resources. I recall the pioneer story of Tío Isaac and Juan that introduced this thesis and the empty and untamed frontier they encountered in the late 1800s upon reaching what is present-day Mexicali. At the time of such early settlement, the Cocopah Indians were largely gone from the territories and only a few daring individuals inhabited these desert lands. The mighty Colorado provided the liquid gold that turned mineral rich earth from sand to farmland. Yet, controlling El Río and making that dream a reality was no easy feat.

In 1904, Colorado River Land Company (CRLC), controlled by U.S. investors, owned the majority of land and water rights to the Colorado River in the Mexicali Valley and represented the primary developing agent with some scattered campesino settlers. The U.S. Federal Government took interest in the growth of agricultural production in Mexicali along with that of the Imperial Valley, CA during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. Such efforts sought to integrate Mexicali into the regional economy of the U.S. Southwest. American capital continued to drive development of Mexicali
lands until 1937, when the territories were expropriated during the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940). Why the delay of twenty years between Article 27 and actual expropriation in Baja California? Dorothy Kerig Peirson writes that the investment needed to transform Mexicali into a productive agricultural center was too great an expense for the young Mexican government following the unstable years of the revolution. Instead, Mexican leaders allowed U.S. interests to pour money into the valley and develop the region with the vision of one day reclaiming Mexicali lands, already outfitted by U.S. capital with the necessary infrastructures to make the land profitable. Further, retroactive enforcement of Article 27 of the Constitution was less than desirable for Mexico, which was trying to expand its economic relations with the United States.

However, the CRLC was not universally met with open arms, particularly by Mexicali campesinos forced to work for an American company on Mexican land even after the promises of the revolutionary constitution. Without an official avenue to advocate for expropriation of CRLC lands, campesinos turned to grassroots mobilization to make their objections heard. Campesino protests reached a peak during the 1920s with the “Movement of Magaña” when Mexican farmers organized sit-ins on CRLC property. Campesinos called the CRLC imperialists. The CRLC retaliated, arguing that occupiers were “rojillos” or communists and Mexican governmental officials punished campesinos, culminating in the imprisonment of the leaders of the movement for several months in 1930.

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28 An proponent of Mexican settlement in Baja California, Pablo Herrera Carillo wrote the following regarding the power of U.S. companies in 1920s Mexicali: “Los nacionales que trabajan para los extranjeros eran una suente de esclavos en su propia tierra” or “Mexicans who work for foreigners are like slaves in their own land;” Bernal, Compendio, 311.
29 Bernal, Compendio, 314.
30 Ibid., 316.
By 1937, however, presidential policies had shifted from the belief “that construction of Mexico’s ‘path to modernity’ required massive foreign investment,” emblematic of the legacy of Díaz, and towards the “Mexicanization” of the northwestern territories under Cárdenas. Cárdenas sought to retake the lands and resources of Baja California for the Mexican people and campaigned for Mexicans to move west and colonize the valley. Cárdenas also believed that opening up Baja California to Mexican settlers would entice citizens who had crossed the border into the Southwest United States as migrant farm workers to return to Mexico, enriching the agricultural economy of the region for the Mexican nation, not for the benefit of U.S. investors. However, Cárdenas’ proposal for expropriation in Mexicali, which included the nationalization of the natural resources and infrastructure in the valley and the creation of banks specifically to finance ejido farmers, offered campesinos too little land. January 27 became an annual holiday known as “Asalto de las Tierras” or “Assault on the Lands,” commemorating the day in 1937 when 5,000 campesinos marched the streets of Mexicali, protesting for larger land plots and faster expropriation. This period of “Mexicanization” and the annual celebration of “Asalto de las Tierras” vilified the Porfirian vision of land development and the subsequent presidencies that honored U.S. investment in the Mexicali Valley, arguing such policies were anti-campesino and, thus, anti-Mexican. Less than twenty-five years later, salinity provoked the same anti-imperialist rhetoric by Mexican actors and similar accusations from the U.S. side of “rojillo” or communist influence along the southern border.

31 Ward, Border Oasis, 5.
32 Bernal, Compendio, vol. 1.
Agricultural boom characterized the years of the 1940s and 1950s following expropriation in the Mexicali Valley. Three months after the appropriations of CRLC land in 1937, Cárdenas distributed approximately 100,000 hectares of Mexicali farmland between 44 ejidos and 4,382 families. 36 of these ejidos received financing from the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal de Mexicali (National Bank of Ejido Credit in Mexicali).33 Campesinos now comprised 76% of the agriculturalists in Mexicali with the other 24% being colonos, a wealthier class of Mexican agriculturalists with private titles to individual land plots larger than those of campesinos. National funds poured into the valley; the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación (The National Irrigation Commission) invested a total of 299 million Mexican pesos between 1937 and 1956, putting roughly 240,000 more hectares of land into production, more than doubling the total land under cultivation in the valley. In 1944, the United States and Mexico signed the Mexican Water Treaty, securing 1.5 MAFY of water, the majority of which met the agricultural needs of the Mexicali Valley. Cotton became the primary crop in the valley, making up over 90% of agricultural production. By 1960, production had nearly reached 500,000 bales of cotton per year, a figure competitive with Yuma Valley and Imperial Valley, CA cotton production levels. Secondary crops included wheat, alfalfa and some fruits and vegetables.34

Population increase followed this economic boom when Mexican nationals migrated from other parts of the country to reap the profits of this new cotton empire. The population of the valley had reached about 400,000 by 1960 and over half of the residents

34 Ibid., Chapter 4.
had immigrated to Baja California since 1940.\textsuperscript{35} In 1942, Mexicali became an attraction for another kind of migration as a way station for the Bracero Program. A series of temporary laws and agreements between the United States and Mexico, the Bracero Program allowed the United States to meet its labor needs during WWII through the large-scale importation of Mexican contractual laborers. Mexicali served as a checkpoint for Mexican migrant workers crossing the border until the end of the initiative in 1964. Considered Mexico’s way of supporting the war effort and symbolic of Mexico’s strong friendship with the United States, the Bracero Program nonetheless allowed for the extensive exploitation of Mexican migrant workers by their American employers. This increased rising tensions between the Mexicali and the Yuma and Imperial Valleys, prominent destinations for Mexicans crossing the border to work as agricultural laborers.

The nation’s third most prominent producer of cotton, the Mexicali Valley seemed like the ultimate campesino success story after the challenging years prior to expropriation. However, as Téllez explains in Agricultura y Migración en el Valle de Mexicali, though campesinos comprised the majority of landowners in the Mexicali Valley at the time of expropriation, the colono sector grew in the decades after the Cárdenas expropriation while the campesino sector plateaued and did not put more land under cultivation. Campesinos in the valley also faced difficulties acquiring financing through the ejido banks and with the unit price for cotton, determined by the Mexican Federal Government. Combined with the pressing need for improvements in irrigation and drainage infrastructure, these elements presented major impediments to the future.
rapid growth of the valley and the campesino sector. Campesinos again took to the streets to advocate for their needs in a series of marches.

Regardless, the Mexicali Valley was a rising star in the Mexican nation and a new competitor for the Yuma and Imperial Valleys when the Salinity Crisis hit. The speed and scale with which new land came under development in Mexicali required massive increases in water deliveries, heightening the necessity of efficient water delivery from the Colorado. In their fervor to compete with U.S. cotton production on the world market, the Mexican Federal Government allowed for the overdevelopment of Mexicali, challenging the limits of the 1.5 MAFY allotment. All of these mounting tensions came to a dangerous height during the Salinity Crisis when Yuma Valley wastewater practices made Colorado River water unusable for Mexicali farmers.

**Unacceptably Salty: Mexican Responses to Salinity**

On November 9, 1961, the Mexican Federal Government officially lodged the first formal complaint against the increased salinity of Colorado River waters destined for Mexicali. Campesinos, frustrated by poor water quality, voiced their concerns to their representatives. The Mexican Ambassador Carillo Flores and the Mexican Commissioner of CILA responded, addressing their complaints to the U.S. Department of State. Though the salinity of Mexico’s apportionment of Colorado River water had been gradually

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36 Tellez also notes that campesino agriculture in the Mexicali Valley differed from the rest of the nation because cotton was an international import/export crop which required a capitalist system of agriculture and did not embody the Marxist ideal of communal subsistence farming; Ibid; *Seis Estudios Sobre Baja California* (Partido Acción Nacional: Mexico, 1964), University of California at San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections Library, *Archival Collections*, 13.

37 The Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM) or the Mexican Communist Party did not organize these protests over credit and cotton prices but did show its solidarity for the campesino cause by participating in demonstrations and spreading awareness of campesino needs. This was all before 1958 when the PRI raided PCM headquarters and dissolved the strength of the party for several years; Columbia University, Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, *Partido Comunista Mexicano records, 1951-1958*, Box 7, Folder 69.
increasing since 1960 with the initiation of new Yuma wastewater practices, Mexicali crops were not significantly threatened until fall of 1961. This is largely because the Mexican apportionment was not evenly dispensed throughout the course of each year. Instead, Mexicali received more water during the height of growing season and less water during times of the year characterized by lapses in production. Therefore, during fall and winter when the planting season for cotton had passed, Mexico received fewer Colorado River waters. This meant that from September to early November, Mexicali campesinos began to feel the effects of the salty water on their second most lucrative crop, wheat, with less pure water to dilute the wastewater Yuma was sending downstream.

What then ensued was a battle of interpretation over both the explicit and implicit terms of the 1944 Mexican Water Treaty, beginning with the formal protest of November 9. In the petition, the Mexican Ambassador and Commissioner argued that the high saline flows Mexicali farmers were receiving violated the 1944 Mexican Water Treaty, stating:

> The initial paragraph of this Treaty mentions, as a basis for the entire treaty, ‘a spirit of cordiality and friendly cooperation’ in the exploitation of the waters of the Rio Grande and Colorado Rivers for use and consumption ‘in order to obtain the most complete and satisfactory utilization thereof…’

If the United States could not insure “satisfactory utilization” for Mexican users, Mexican representatives felt their northern neighbor had broken the “spirit of friendly cooperation” that served as the basis for the Treaty. The document of protest also declared the United States in violation of Article 3 of the Treaty, a provision that implies Mexican receipts of Colorado water must be viable for certain uses. The United States countered, citing Mexican water allotment could in fact come “from any and all sources” and from

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38 Ambassador of Mexico, Embassy of Mexico to U.S. Secretary of State, November 14, 1961, DOS Division of Language Services, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/11-96.
39 Ibid.
“whatever origin,” Articles 11 and 12 of the 1944 Treaty respectively. U.S. officials considered these clauses explicit sanctioning of Yuma wastewater practices, arguing that according to these articles the 1944 Treaty guaranteed Mexico only a particular quantity, not quality of river water.

The Mexican complaint did not stop with the 1944 Treaty but further deemed U.S. actions in conflict with International Water Law, which directly states one riparian river water user cannot contaminate the source of another riparian user. In fact, Mexico threatened the United States with a lawsuit in International Court if the United States remained noncompliant with Mexican demands to end the contamination. U.S. officials expressed a reluctance to do so, stating Yuma farmers would likely sue if their agricultural production suffered as a result. Mexican officials found this justification for U.S. inaction and delay neither compelling nor valid, responding this “in no way justifies [U.S.] right to cause Mexican farmers loss or damage.” Mexican representatives argued U.S. actions ruptured the existing harmony between the two nations, undermining the collaborative nature that defined many contemporary U.S.-Mexico projects such as the co-sponsored construction of dams on the Colorado.

Despite such threats, the United States remained steadfast, refusing to assume responsibility for causing the crisis and terminate contamination. The United States remained unyielding until Mexicali campesinos themselves made their grievances known through demonstrations and the popular press. Shortly after Mexican governmental

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41 A riparian user means a party with property adjacent a water source, the Colorado River in this instance.
42 Ambassador of Mexico, Embassy of Mexico to U.S. Secretary of State, November 14, 1961, DOS Division of Language Services, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/11-96.
representatives submitted their official protests, activist groups within the Mexicali community began to send letters of complaint to the U.S. Department of State and to the local government of Arizona as well. One of these petitions came from the Comité Coordinator de la Iniciative Privada de Mexicali (Committee for the Coordination of Private Initiative of Mexicali), a coalition of local businessmen and colonos, to the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Thomas Mann. In this telegram of November 29, the Comité Privada decries U.S. inaction:

Su gobierno inhumanamente y indebidamente está reteniendo agua utilizable del Río Colorado para consumo exclusivo de su país sustituyéndola con aguas de drenaje contaminadas para entrega a México. Consideramos que la actitud de su gobierno constituye acto de privación de derechos y de agresión contra el pueblo de este valle.44

In early December protests broke out in the local Mexicali press when the newspaper ABC published a full-page article entitled “A La Opinión Publica,” a call-to-arms to the Mexicali public. The publication exposed the crisis, defended the Mexican government’s formal protest, and addressed the U.S. government, saying, “Esta es la oportunidad de que el Gobierno Americano demuestre su amistad.”45 The article demonstrated the severity of the crisis for Mexicali: “Si esta situación no se corrige rápidamente puede perderse en su totalidad la cosecha de trigo de este año y continuar dicha contaminación, los Valles de Mexicali y San Luis se convertirán en un desierto de

43 Henceforth referred to as the Comité Privada.
44 “Your government is inhumanly and unjustly retaining usable Colorado River water to be used exclusively for consumption within your country, replacing this water with contaminated wastewaters for delivery to Mexico. This act by your government constitutes a deprivation of rights and an act of aggression against the community of this valley;” Comité Coordinator de la Iniciative Privada de Mexicali to Dean Rusk, DOS, November 29, 1961, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/11-2961.
45 “This is the opportunity for the American Government to demonstrate its friendship;” “A La Opinión Publica,” ABC (page 16), December 7, 1961, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322.
This language revealed a fear of both short-term economic losses due to salinity but also of the potential landless destitution of Mexicali residents if salt pollution continued unchecked.

A week after this rallying address, Mexicali campesinos took to the streets, demonstrating in front of the U.S. Consulate in Mexicali under the leadership of Alfonso Garzón, the President of the Liga Agraria Estatal (State Agrarian League), a newly formed organization created in defense of campesino interests in Baja California. Garzón would become a key leader of campesino protest throughout the Salinity Crisis, though U.S. and Mexican actors alike, including Comité Privada members, would criticize him for adopting the salinity platform to further his own political goals. Nonetheless, Garzón served as perhaps the most powerful mobilizing figure of the Mexicali populace. On December 13, Garzón marched in front of the American Consulate in Mexicali, leading roughly 400 Mexicali residents behind him, addressing the crowd with the words of President López Mateos who said, “Mexico begins with Baja California.” Garzón added, “but…if the salt water was not stopped, the end of Mexico would begin in Baja California.”

The next day another protest took place, organized by the Comité Privada and heavily advertised in the local press, of roughly 6,000-10,000 participants according to the American Consulate, 20,000 according to the Mexico City Press and 35,000

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46 “If this situation does not improve rapidly it is possible to lose the whole wheat crop this year and, if said contamination continues, the Mexicali and San Luis Valleys will become a desert of salt;” Ibid.
47 Henceforth referred to as the Liga; Bernal, Compendio, 382.
49 Ibid.
according to some historiography.\textsuperscript{50} In a Foreign Service Despatch sent to the U.S. Department of State, the American Consulate in Mexicali recorded the messages of eleven different banners demonstrators used at the December 14 protest. These banners emphasized the themes of respect, justice, and world piece contained the key phrases “Inter-American solidarity,” “Alliance for Progress,” and “Good neighborliness.”\textsuperscript{51} The Mexican press quickly gravitated toward the protests and the national newspaper Excelsior published a full-page open letter “calling upon [President] López Mateos to intervene directly and personally with President Kennedy to correct this situation” and, like ABC before, warning that the saline waters were “threatening to convert the region into an ‘enormous desert of salt.’”\textsuperscript{52}

Early Mexicali protests, though characterized by political fractions, soon unified as the factions reorganized to form the Comité de Defensa del Pueblo de Baja California (Committee for the Defense of the People of Baja California).\textsuperscript{53} While the more conservative business oriented Comité Privada differed from the left-leaning, agrarian-focused Garzón and the Liga, these short-lived divisions certainly did not detract from the successes of the massive demonstrations.\textsuperscript{54} Though, they did reflect economic and social divisions within the Mexicali agriculture sector between colonos and campesinos. In fact, the Comité Privada even occasionally tipped-off the American Embassy in Mexicali when a leftist or communist association intended to show up at a campesino protest.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid; Mexico City Consulate to Secretary of State, December 16, 1961, DOS Incoming Telegram No. 1729, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/12-1561; Bernal, \textit{Compendio}, vol. 1, 440.
\textsuperscript{52} Mexico City Consulate to Secretary of State, December 16, 1961, DOS Incoming Telegram No. 1729, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/12-1561.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.; Bernal, \textit{Compendio}, 438.
uninvited. Presumably, colonos and other private businessmen in Mexicali saw the merits of both the mobilizing rhetoric of the campesino protests but also the need to stabilize the political landscape of Mexicali.

The far-reaching effects of campesino protests were publically visible in the regional and national press. The bold letter to President López Mateos in the very prominent and conservative-leaning periodical Excelsior alone demonstrates the extensive success of these initial marches in gaining support across the Mexican political and economic spectrum. On December 15, Mexico began to bypass the highly saline waters of the nation’s Colorado water allotment into the Sea of Cortés rather than let these flows destroy Mexicali crops.55

55 Mexicali farmers stopped using Colorado River water altogether, relying on what few other sources they could to support their farms. The polluted water flowed its normal course downstream without being used; Bernal, Compendio, 439.
II. Pass the Salt: U.S. Delay

For as long as possible, the United States responded to Mexican objections and indemnification with denial and inaction. However, the campesino protests perpetuated tensions between the two nations to the point where the U.S. Federal Government could no longer ignore Mexican complaints.

We should face up to the fact that the Wellton-Mohawk salinity problem was not created by an act of God. It was deliberately created by us on the theory that because the 1944 Colorado Water Treaty is silent on the issue of quality, the United States had no obligation to use reasonable care to avoid unnecessary injury to a lower riparian user.56

The excerpt above from a telegram to Secretary of State Edwin McCammon Martin from U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Thomas Mann exposes how the United States initially refused to accept accountability for salinity but then reversed course and acknowledged its obligation to improve water quality for Mexican farmers. Mann began his telegram dated August 22, 1963: “Urgent and important decisions are necessary concerning the salt water problem which continues to be the number one issue in our relations with Mexico.”57 By this time, the state of affairs with Mexico had deteriorated to such an extent as to warrant this blunt discussion of U.S. culpability and the growing need for action. The confession continued:

According to this theory [the initial U.S. interpretation of the 1944 Treaty], we are, in consequence, free to dump on the Mexicali Valley over an estimated 20 year period the highly saline Wellton-Mohawk underground lake and gradually to replace those underground waters with water of a better quality…The fact is that the Wellton-Mohawk is pumping out and sending down to Mexico nearly four times as much salt as would normally be required for successful irrigation operations. There is no way to disguise this hard fact or the additional fact that

56 The Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation District included the Yuma, Valley; T. R. Martin to Thomas Mann, August 22, 1963, DOS Telegram, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322, 521.1, Microfilm Reel #12.
57 Ibid.
gradually but inevitably the productivity of the soil of the Mexicali Valley will be seriously impaired if the water is used.\textsuperscript{58}

What characterized the U.S. response to salinity at the very onset of the crisis and what events transpired that provoked Mann to write such a desperate telegram? To answer these questions, we must further explore U.S. responses to the Mexican Federal Government’s first official letters of protest.

On October 17, 1961, IBWC Commissioner L.H. Hewitt wrote to Robert M. Sayre, the State Department Officer in Charge of Mexican Affairs, regarding a complaint from the CILA Mexican Commissioner that the salt content of Mexico’s water allotment was too high for crop production.\textsuperscript{59} Commissioner Hewitt energetically offered several measures for the immediate improvement of Mexican water quality; Hewitt suggested the Bureau of Reclamation, within the Department of the Interior, discontinue pumping 4,000 ppm waters from Yuma wells and release additional Colorado River water to Mexico for dilution purposes.\textsuperscript{60} Sayre’s response condemned any such conciliatory actions; Sayre replied that shutting down the pumping of well waters would not help the situation and would instead “arouse the severest criticism” from U.S. Colorado River water users.\textsuperscript{61} Sayre refocused the discourse on the measures that Mexico might take to improve their water supply without U.S. concessions that could potentially undermine the benefits Yuma farmers enjoyed through current wastewater practice.\textsuperscript{62} This reveals how, at the

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} The State Department Officer in Charge of Mexican Affairs was a position within the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, U.S. Department of State.
\textsuperscript{60} U.S. Commissioner L.H. Hewitt, IBWC and Robert M. Sayre, October 27, 1961, DOS MOC (Telephone), NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/10-2761.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
onset of the crisis, the Department of State prioritized the needs of Arizona and the Basin States over those of Mexican water users.

A memorandum of a telephone call from the IBWC Secretary to the Department of Interior confirmed Sayre’s “‘strong position opposing any action’ on the U.S. side…because this would imply a responsibility on our part to deliver water of a quality desired by Mexico.”63 Further, the U.S. section of the IBWC was advised not to participate in any investigation of the effects of the saline water on Mexican crops as, “this would be outside the responsibility of the Commission…[which was] only to see that Mexico receives the quantity of water specified in the treaty.”64 According to the Department of Interior, Mexico could: use well water instead of river water in the winter when low flows from the Colorado made the water Mexico received less diluted and, therefore, more saline; ask for an advance on their 1962 Colorado River allotment to increase dilution; or begin growing more salt-tolerant crops instead of cotton.65 These proposals, particularly the first and last, were not small feats. Such measures would have involved almost the complete restructuring of Mexicali farming and irrigation practices, which would have been a daunting challenge for campesino agriculture. Such suggestions reflected the Bureau of Reclamation’s refusal to take responsibility for Yuma’s wastewater practices or make concessions to aid Mexicali farmers, even those that would not disrupt U.S. farming practices such as releasing greater amounts of water for dilution.

This series of exchanges reveals clear differences in the responses of the IBWC and the Bureau of Reclamation. In these initial correspondences, Sayre and the

64 Ibid.
Department of State deferred to the Bureau of Reclamation, prioritizing the preservation of internal domestic relations with the Basin States. Because of its inherent bi-national focus and structure, the IBWC approached salinity with a greater understanding of Mexican needs and with a stronger impetus for and willingness to reach agreement with Mexico. The regional and stubbornly insular Bureau of Reclamation focused instead on meeting the needs of Arizona and Basin States throughout the crisis, often in spite of the international climate.

Such resistance by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Basin States, with the backing of Congress, greatly hindered the progress of international negotiations throughout the crisis. These regional bodies feared that conceding too much to Mexico too readily would give precedence to the future needs of Mexico on the lower Colorado above those of U.S. users. Arizona Senator Carl Hayden played a particularly important role in defending Arizona’s future interests in Colorado River water. Senator Hayden, a longtime supporter of Yuma Valley farming, alleged that meeting Mexican demands now could lead to the forfeiture of some of Arizona’s water allotment to their downstream neighbor. In fact, many throughout the Basin States believed that Mexico was merely using the Salinity Crisis to enhance the quantity of its water allotment.

However, campesino protests on the border elevated the international importance of the Salinity Crisis, forcing the U.S. Federal Government to prioritize relations with Mexico over the interests of the Basin States. In turn, local Arizona agriculturalists and their representatives felt slighted by the U.S. Federal Government. Ward writes that Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District “administrators felt victimized by the

tendency of national leaders to give precedence to cordial relations with Mexico over the resolution of the [Yuma] Valley’s environmental and economic problems.”67

Representing the District, William A. Couple led a White House official on a tour of the Yuma Valley. Couple sarcastically reported in a letter to Senator Hayden, “I gather the impression that he [the White House official] was more sympathetic with the ‘poor Mexicans’ than with the ‘rich Americans.’”68 This sense of victimization only incensed local residents and officials to further advocate their cause and refuse acquiescence to Mexican needs.69

When it became apparent to the U.S. Federal Government that there were greater things at stake than the appeasement of the Basin States, the cracks in the U.S. position of denial began to show. By early 1962, the Bureau of Reclamation had begun releasing additional waters downstream to dilute the salinity of waters reaching Mexico. A mid-January telephone conversation between A. B. West of the Bureau of Reclamation and IBWC Commissioner Hewitt manifested burgeoning U.S. recognition of the mounting crisis. Mexico claimed that U.S. efforts to ameliorate the situation, namely the amount of additional waters delivered to Mexico for dilution purposes, were insufficient. West expressed the Bureau “felt there was more water [for dilution] being delivered than the Mexicans were willing to admit,” again revealing the reluctance of Bureau officials to make concessions to Mexico.70 At the time, water was being released at rates anywhere

68 Ibid.
69 The Salinity Crisis was not the first time Arizonans felt that the national government was unreceptive to local needs. When Yuma Valley farmers initially felt the burdens of overly salty water in 1940s, the Federal Government failed to provide relief despite petitions from local residents and representatives; Ibid., 56.
70 Regional Director A. B. West, Region 3, Bureau of Reclamation, Boulder City Nevada and U.S. Commissioner L.H. Hewitt, IBWC, January 12, 1962, MOC (Telephone), NACP, RG 59, 611.12322, 521.1, Microfilm Reel #13.
from 1,510 second-feet to 2,190 second-feet but failing to reach the 2,300 second-feet rate of release requested by Mexico. Essentially, the saline waters were not being properly diluted. Upon learning of such discrepancy, West assured Hewitt:

He had not realized that deliveries were far short [and]...said he realized the international situation was acute and that, unless he was instructed by Washington to the contrary, he would release sufficient water so as to be sure that Mexico gets the amount to which it is entitled...this would result in some over-supply; however, he felt that conditions were such that he would be justified in taking such action.\footnote{Ibid.}

By this point, James W. Boyd of the American Embassy in Mexicali had begun reporting that several local Mexicali officials and organizations of liberal and communist backgrounds were taking advantage of the crisis to further their own agendas. In fact, the fear of communist insurgents leading the campesino movement appeared and reappeared in the writings of U.S. officials and the public despite its stark absence from the Mexican governmental and campesino accounts. This American preoccupation with communist sympathies at the border contrasted with the reactions of the larger Mexican public which focused on both the potential consequences of salinity for economic progress and international friendship with the United States. Regardless, the visible campesino objection to salinity and this preoccupation with the role of subversive communist forces in the protests galvanized U.S. Federal officials to change their policies and seek out immediate, though temporary, solutions to the high saline conditions of the water supply.

As they began to address the concerns of Mexicali agriculturalists and provide water for dilutions, U.S. officials emphasized practical versus legal solutions to the crisis. Eager to avoid International Court and also the obligation to change Yuma wastewater management, U.S. authorities reinforced the merits of the practical measures Mexico
could take in order to be able to use the polluted waters over the long-term, such as enhancing water infrastructure and agrarian practices.

By suggesting Mexico focus on the practical, U.S. officials also implied Mexico’s responses to salinity were excessively emotional versus rational. According to one U.S. report, the Mexican Ambassador “again converted the problem into an emergency.”72 A resolution in International Court could take any number of months or years. Conversely, increasing waters for dilution or building infrastructures could have more immediate significance and, thus, serve as more practical solutions to the crisis. Mexico would most certainly have succeeded according to International Water Laws had the case gone to International Court, in spite of any interpretation of the Treaty of 1944.73 Therefore, Mexican threats, especially in light of U.S. delays, were not exaggerated nor overly emotional but circumstantially appropriate. By characterizing Mexican responses as irrational or extreme, U.S. officials attempted to diminish the severity of the crisis and justify U.S. inaction.

Efforts by U.S. officials to ignore the validity of Mexican legal claims and their implications – that the United States would be found guilty in International Court – demonstrate the limits of U.S. willingness to participate in a solution. U.S. authorities realized the need to address this crisis because of its political implications, structuring their rhetoric to appear disposed to negotiate. However, they resisted as much as possible investing U.S. dollars, or risking U.S. dollars in the form of Yuma agricultural

72 Mr. Crimmins to Mr. Woodward, February 16, 1962, United States Government Memorandum, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/2-1662.
73 Aside, from potentially gaining concessions on the salinity issue, Mexico could jeopardize U.S. economic investment, the Alliance for Progress and other bi-national initiatives by taking the case to International Court. Both nations, therefore, saw the benefits of solving the crisis without the intervention of outside arbitration. This, however, does not justify U.S. inaction.
production, to end the contamination. Even as the U.S. began to pump waters for dilution into Mexico, politicians pressured Mexico to solve the crisis through its own practical means.
III. Of Caravan & Commies: Engaging President Kennedy

On February 16, 1962, the Salt Caravan erupted to a degree where the force of campesino objections meant U.S. action could no longer be forestalled. February 16 marked the day when the U.S. Federal Government recognized salinity not as a minor diplomacy issue but as an international relations emergency that required a bi-national solution to the crisis. The Salt Caravan sparked the interest of President John F. Kennedy who in turn completely shifted the dynamics of negotiation by accepting accountability for Yuma Valley actions.

On February 7, Garzón and the Liga left their encampment in front of the American Consulate in Mexicali and traveled over 450 miles into the heart of the nation, taking their protest to Mexico City. On February 16, 220 members arrived via bus, and 40 more via car to take part in what became known as the Salt Caravan.74 More significant than the size of the protest was the number of miles and days traveled by campesinos and their allies to make their grievances known to their government, the Mexican nation, the United States and the greater global community. Upon reaching the capital, Mexicali campesinos were joined by sympathizers in demonstrations in front of the American Consulate in Mexico City. Protestors distributed flyers to educate the Mexican public about the Salinity Crisis. The U.S. press, both newspaper and television, captured an attempt thwarted by Mexican police of more than 7,000 protestors to return their U.S. work visas along with a card signed by each demonstrator which read, “No podemos considerar amigo a un gobierno que arroja los desechos de sus aguas a nuestras tierras,

74 Thomas Mann, American Embassy Mexico to DOS, February 16, 1962, DOS Airgram (Departmental and Foreign Service), NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322/2-1662.
The seriousness of such demonstrations provoked responses from Mexican representatives, U.S. officials, and, most significantly, President Kennedy who by March 1962 played an active role in finding a solution to this ever-pressing international dilemma.

Mexican President López Mateos announced a $81 million plan to rescue the Mexicali Valley from salinity and improve its infrastructure over the next five years, but felt the plan could not be fully implemented without assurance from the United States that water salinity would decrease. When the Salt Caravan lasted into early March, the White House asked on behalf of President Kennedy for a memorandum on the crisis. The introduction to the requested memorandum read as such:

Political emotions on this issue are running high in Mexico. The Department [of State] has concluded that our relations with Mexico are so severely strained that immediate action is required to avoid serious damage. There is a possibility that Mexico could successfully carry the issue to International Court...the political temper in Mexico is such that Mexico will soon be required to take such a step unless constructive action is taken by the United States.

The memorandum further reported that lack of advance notice about changes in Yuma wastewater practices deeply contributed to the feeling within Mexico “that [the] 400,000 acre irrigation district in the Mexicali Valley and the 300,000 people settled in the Valley from all over Mexico [were] being sacrificed to help the 75,000 acre Wellton-Mohawk irrigation district with its 6,000 people.” The report mentioned negotiations had reached a stalemate, as the U.S. Basin States believed Mexico was trying to steal their water by

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75 “We cannot consider a friend a government that throws its wastewaters on our shores, with grave danger to our economy;” Bernal, Compendio, 443.
76 T.R. Martin to George C. McGee, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, June 6, 1962, “Correspondence with Governors on Salinity Problem,” NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322, 521.1 Microfilm Reel #16.
77 L.D. Battle, Executive Secretary, “Memorandum for Mr. McGeorge Bundy, the White House, Subject: Salinity of Colorado River Water,” March 14, 1962, NACP, RG 59, DF, 1960-63, 611.12322, 521.1, Microfilm Reel #12.
78 Ibid.
exaggerating the crisis. Additionally, the memorandum emphasized the coming fall, precisely October 1962, when Mexico would face the seasonal reduction in the amount of water they received which would worsen the effects of the salt pollution.

Upon receiving this memorandum, President Kennedy delineated a clear calendar, which he expected all involved agencies to follow precisely in order to find solutions to the crisis and assuage the Mexican public. The State Department made all efforts to refute the popular perception that the United States was delaying. The U.S. Basin States continued to exert pressure on the Federal Government to slow down the process, fearful that the excited Mexican public would push the U.S. government into making hasty decisions to the detriment of Arizona farmers. The White House was then flooded with letters from the Basin State governors and senators, but the international situation proved more critical. A State Department correspondence read, “Violence has so far been avoided only because the Mexican Government has urged moderation on its people and restrained violence. We cannot expect this policy to continue if we do not reach prompt accommodation with Mexico.”

President Kennedy began discussing solutions to salinity with President López Mateos in mid-March, gave the IBWC 45 days to render a report with solutions that could be implemented before October of 1963, and scheduled a visit to Mexico for June 29, 1962.

Additionally, by the end of March 1962 the U.S. Federal Government added a clause to the Alliance for Progress affirming U.S. commitment to lend the funds and experts necessary to Mexico in order to resolve the Salinity Crisis. Further, the U.S. Congress in March of 1962 approved almost $300,000 to investigate the roots of the

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80 Ibid.
crisis. Once President Kennedy became involved in resolving the Salinity Crisis, the United States change its initial policies and launched a full-fledged effort to save the international partnership between the United States and Mexico in order to maintain the Alliance for Progress.

**Hero-making: Kennedy’s Visit to Mexico**

President Kennedy’s visit to Mexico from June 29 through July 1 of 1962, in the company of his wife Jackie, proved the most overwhelmingly successful of these initiatives. In fact, “the most important tool was Kennedy himself.” In these short days, the U.S. President collaborated with President López Mateos, issuing a Joint Communiqué addressing salinity, and confessed the United States was at fault for the crisis and co-responsible for resolving it. Simultaneously, Kennedy furthered his Alliance for Progress, with the aim of spreading democracy in the Western Hemisphere, through his rhetoric and gestures of friendship.

In Mexico City, Kennedy and López Mateos solidified efforts to ameliorate the salinity situation by October of 1963 in their Joint Communiqué issued on Saturday, June 29. The document began, stating both Presidents López Mateos and Kennedy had conducted a series of meetings during Kennedy’s visit “which mark[ed] a new era of understanding and friendship between Mexico and the United States.” “Both Presidents reaffirmed the dedication of their countries to the ideals of liberty and personal dignity”

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81 Bernal, *Compendio*, 435.
and “fully accept[ed] the responsibility of every sovereign nation to form its own policies, without outside dictation or coercion,” a reference to keeping Soviet and Cuban influences at check in Latin America.  

Further enforcing the U.S.-Mexico partnership against U.S.S.R. intrusion, the Joint Communiqué reaffirmed the agreements of the OAS in Punta del Este, Uruguay in August 1961. The agreement on the Salinity Crisis concluded the Communiqué: “They expressed their determination, with the scientific studies as a basis, to reach a permanent and effective solution at the earliest possible time with the aim of preventing the recurrence of this problem by October 1963.” Not only did the Communiqué imply a true spirit of collaboration between the two leaders on the salinity issue but committed both governments to finding a joint and permanent solution to the crisis.

In his first-hand account of the key discussion between the two presidents about the Salinity Crisis (the discussion was held at 11a.m. on Sunday, July 1, 1962), Secretary of State Martin, writes, “Kennedy followed up by confessing his belief that our Wellton-Mohawk irrigation project should never have been approved.” Further, Martin relayed:

With the conclusion to the discussion of the two major bilateral issues, on both of which the U.S. admitted to being the guilty party, President Kennedy in a characteristic but unexpected fashion asked me if there weren’t any issues on which Mexico rather than the U.S. was at fault.

Remarkably, the President graciously accepted complete responsibility on behalf of his nation for the complications due to Yuma wastewater practices.

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 3.
86 Martin, Kennedy and Latin America, 166.
87 The “two major bilateral issues” Martin refers to are the Salinity Crisis and the Chamizal Dispute, a debate over the U.S.-Mexico border line along the Rio Grande in Texas; Ibid.
Such diplomacy choices directly reflected U.S. attempts to deflect a larger crisis at hand, the spreading influence of communism, in light of Mexico’s disturbing support of Cuba. Predating Kennedy’s visit to Mexico a newspaper report from Mexico City entitled “Reds Spur Riots in Mexico” read, “Rural disorders, believed [to have been] provoked by the Communists in connection with Kennedy’s forthcoming visit here, were reported in several areas today,” including a “hunger strike” in Sonora, the state adjoining Baja California to mainland Mexico.88 Meanwhile, in another article on the same page of the publication President López denied that “President Kennedy or any of his aides might make [any suggestions] that Mexico assume the leadership of Latin America” during Kennedy’s upcoming visit.89 López Mateos stated, “I don’t see the need for any ‘little alliance’ within the Alliance for Progress.”90 However the State Department’s “Memorandum on the President’s State Visit to Mexico” of June 4, 1962 stated in its second bullet point that “Mexico can well become the bridgehead for this country to the rest of Latin America, and could be a model for the successful implementation of the Alliance for Progress.”91 While the United States hoped Kennedy’s travel would promote Mexico as a liaison for the Alliance for Progress and the spread of democracy throughout Latin America, communist forces protested the impending visit and López Mateos asserted he would not be bullied into assuming an ideological leadership role in Latin America.

90 Ibid.
91 Memorandum on the President’s State Visit to Mexico (June 4, 1962), JFK Digital Archives [Digital Identifier: JFKPOF-122-006], 1.
Kennedy’s visit successfully assuaged “political emotions…running high in Mexico”92 both regarding the Salinity Crisis and Cold War diplomacy, while eliciting the support of the Mexican government and people for the Alliance for Progress. A television broadcast called Kennedy’s stay in Mexico, “one of his greatest triumphs in personal diplomacy.”93 It took one hour and eighteen minutes for the presidential party to travel the nine miles from the Mexico City airport to the home of President López Mateos because of the two million people assembled to greet the Kennedys. The broadcast also reported the travel produced “No untoward incident or anti-American sign.”94 The President’s opening remarks upon arrival recalled a shared history of revolution in the United States and Mexico, emphasizing the need for future unity, declaring, “Neither of our revolutions is yet complete; indeed, neither could ever be complete within the boundaries of a single nation” but only through a “hemisphere-wide undertaking.”95 Kennedy proclaimed, “Together we have the power and will to show the world that a free democracy is the best road, the only road, to national development and national dignity.”96 Each act of friendship, such as admitting the United States was at fault for the salinity affair, meant for Kennedy a step forward towards the aforementioned “hemisphere-wide undertaking” to spread democracy.

Because of the accomplishments of this meeting and the Mexican public’s fascination with the U.S. President and his wife, President Kennedy became a champion of the Salinity Crisis and his death in November of 1963 was heavily mourned among the

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93 “President John F. Kennedy in Mexico, June 29, 30 & July 1, 1962” (Youtube video uploaded by HelmerReenberg on April 16, 2009), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUoRcrGhNRI.
94 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 2-3.
Mexican people. Kennedy’s efforts reflect his commitment to improving U.S.-Mexico relations in the hopes of uniting the Western Hemisphere through democracy.

**Domestic Divide: The Basin States**

As President Kennedy made every effort to repair relations with Mexico, the Basin States continued to dissent from the national agenda. When the Federal Government realized that the Bureau of Reclamation’s errors in water management created the Salinity Crisis in the first place, the divide between national and regional interests grew even more.

Secretary of State Martin reflects on the contradictions between federal and regional interests:

Closing down our project [referring to the Gila Project] would have been the quickest and simplest solution technically but neither the President nor the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, could prevail upon the Bureau of Reclamation (in the Department of the Interior) with its solid backing from the Congress, to consider this even though in other parts of the country most farmers were being paid by the government to take land out of production to reduce price-depressing surpluses.

The shutting down of the Gila Project would not only require the United States to buy out Yuma farmers but also would mean a loss of roughly fifty million dollars in federal investments toward the construction of irrigation and drainage systems in the valley.

However, according to Martin, the Federal Government would have been more than willing to suffer the financial loss but for the resistance of the Bureau of Reclamation.

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A document dated October 30, 1962 reveals the Federal Government’s exhausted sympathy with regional opinion and especially with the Bureau: “The problem [of the Salinity Crisis] seems to have arisen as the result of a misjudgment in the Bureau of Reclamation and their delay in reaching a solution may come from a desire not to acknowledge an error.”100 Whereas at the beginning of the crisis, federal officials deferred to the Bureau of Reclamation, assuming those most intimately acquainted with the Yuma Valley could better assess Mexican accusations and demands, the campesino protests of early 1962 provoked the Federal Government to make its own evaluation of the affairs. The same document reads:

Our enemies have seized upon the saline problem to attack us with considerable success…Mexican political officials have voiced their concern. The Mexican press has published considerable criticism of the United States’ position and the people of Mexicali have staged several public demonstrations and protest caravans. A failure to resolve this problem will have very serious foreign relations repercussions for the United States.101

Despite significant objection from the Basin States and their affiliates, negotiations at the national-international level persisted throughout the 1960s, producing Minutes 218, 241, and 242. The fight over salinity continued long past Kennedy’s administration and his assassination into the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson who, following President Kennedy’s example, resolved to find a permanent resolution to the crisis.

100 “Salinity Problem with Mexico on the Lower Colorado River” (October 30, 1962), JFK Digital Archives [Digital Identifier: JFKPOF-122-002], 5.
101 Ibid.
IV. The Nixon-Echeverría Years

While campesino demonstration defined the early years of the Salinity Crisis, the intricacies of international diplomacy between high-ranking officials almost entirely characterized the later years. The middle years, 1963-1966, bridged the early years dominated by campesino demonstrations and the later years of negotiations at the president’s table. During these middle years, campesinos continued to vigorously protest their right to parity, an equal share in the quality of Colorado River water. This forced the United States to uphold its commitment to resolve the crisis. Campesino actions during these middle years sustained attention for this issue on both sides of the border, paving the way for a permanent solution to salinity with the presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez in 1973. Physical demonstrations still took place in these years, however, protests took on a different nature: the campesino cause became a literature campaign to inform the national and international spheres of the ongoing problem of salinity.

“La Sal No Debe Separar A Dos Pueblos Amigos”

The wide-ranging influence of the brochure “La Sal No Debe Separar A Dos Pueblos Amigos” or “Salt Shouldn’t Separate Friendly Peoples” epitomizes the success of the campesino literature campaign (see image below). Mexican Senator Gustavo Vildosola Almada sponsored the printing of 50,000 copies of “La Sal” in June of 1964, distributing them throughout Mexico to educate the rest of the country about the Salinity Crisis. According to an Airgram from the American Consul in Mexicali, “fifteen thousand copies might have been distributed to the local farmers and probably the same

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amount has been mailed to different organizations…encouraging [them] to participate in nation-wide protest.”

With the collaboration of prominent engineer Emilio López Zamora and journalist and José Merino Millán well acquainted with the Salinity Crisis, “La Sal” exposed both the political circumstances and, importantly, the technical aspects of the crisis in great detail. For example, the pamphlet compared a glass of water, undrinkable because it contained a spoonful of salt, with a potable jug of water containing that same spoonful of salt. This analogy clearly demonstrated for the average citizen the consequences of the salt-influx due to the Yuma wastewaters and how dilution could be used to resolve the problem. “La Sal” also clearly synthesized for the lay public the engineering elements of the crisis with the use of four labeled maps and charts and showed photographs of agricultural land in the Mexicali Valley lying fallow due to the salt influx.

“La Sal” functioned not only as an informational brochure but also as an appeal for support and activism. In his introduction entitled “Advertencia” or “Warning,” Senator Almada wrote the purpose of the brochure was to defend the nation, “contra cualquier agresión directa o indirecta que signifique un atentado a los intereses del país.” Almada continued the goal of “La Sal” was to “desp[értar] el sentido de solidaridad” or awaken a sense of national solidarity. “La Sal” further declared the State of Arizona in violation of both the 1944 Treaty and International Water Law, and that nothing could justify U.S. actions when wastewater was harming thousands of Mexican families. Mexico, however, had upheld its obligations under the 1944 Treaty

104 “Against any direct or indirect attack, either of which means an attack on the country’s interests;” Gustavo Vildosola Almada, “La Sal,” 1.
105 Ibid.
and officials were doing their part to negotiate. In its conclusion, “La Sal” stated that the inability to beneficially use Mexicali land because of salinity “sería tanto como perder una parte del territorio nacional,” recalling U.S. territorial expansionism into Baja California at the turn of the century. Overall “La Sal,” in its content and the scope of its dissemination across the country, successfully facilitated national engagement in the Salinity Crisis.

The popular press followed suit, printing throughout these middle years informative articles, highly accusatory of the United States. The cartoon from the June 1964 edition of “Ceteme,” the official publication of the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Confederation of Mexican Workers), depicts Arizona Senator Carl Hayden dressed in superhero garb, pouring tons of salt on a helpless and unclothed Mexican agriculturalist. Other examples seen below mock the Alliance for Progress and link Yuma Valley’s actions to the Manifest Destiny ideology that defined turn of the century U.S. settlement in the Delta. These efforts to provoke both national and international activism through the press and other literary means placed pressure on the U.S. government to uphold its commitment and resolve the Salinity Crisis.

106 “Would be like losing a part of the national territory;” Ibid., 3-5.

Left: This image by journalist José Natividad Rosales plays on the phrase “Alliance for Progress” but instead deems it “SALianza para el Progress” to describe how salinity has undermined U.S.-Mexican partnership. Right: A political cartoon demonstrating with the use of an hourglass how it is only a matter of time before the U.S.A. buries Mexico in salt. The script at the top reads, “It is Manifest Destiny that the roosters on top always injure those on the bottom.”

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108 Bernal, Compendio.
The Negotiation Table
In May of 1964, four hundred protestors marched from the Chamber of Commerce to the U.S. Consulate in Mexicali with a salt-filled coffin, representing the plight of Baja California. Abruptly in August of the same year, the Comité General de la Defensa del Valle de Mexicali (The Committee for the Defense of the Valley), which had organized the aforementioned protest, called off all future demonstrations.\textsuperscript{109} In anticipation of a forthcoming settlement to the crisis, the Mexican Federal Government had requested that they do so.\textsuperscript{110} The promise of an imminent solution to salinity significantly deterred campesino protest and the Comité General would not meet again until 1969. Though the primary setting of the Salinity Crisis would move from the fields and streets to the negotiation table, campesino protest had forced the two national governments into dialogue with one another, which would eventually produce a definitive solution to the Salinity Crisis.

A solution to Colorado River water quality now entailed mediation over the conditions and wording of several additions to the mission of the International Boundary & Water Commission. These three minutes were, namely, Minute 218 (1965), Minute 241 (1972), and Minute 242 (1973), spanning the U.S. presidencies of Johnson (1963-1969) and Nixon (1969-1974) and the Mexican presidencies of Díaz Ordaz (1958-1964) and Echeverría (1970-1976).

On February 22, 1964, Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Adolfo López Mateos met in Palm Springs, California, releasing a Joint Communiqué that declared a sustained commitment to finding a permanent solution to salinity. Notably, during said discussion,

\textsuperscript{109} Henceforth referred to as the Comité General. The Comité General was the successor organization to the Comité de Defensa del Pueblo de Baja California (Committee for the Defense of the People of Baja California) and responsible for the majority of organized protest until August of 1964.

\textsuperscript{110} Ward, Border Oasis, 85.
President Johnson honored former President Kennedy’s initiatives for Latin American by pairing discussion of the Salinity Crisis with that of the Alliance for Progress. As technicians of the IBWC/CILA labored intensely to find a practical resolution to saline waters, the focus of negotiations moved away from the “law’s delay” and any threat of a suit in International Court.\footnote{Ambassador Herbert Brownell, Special Representative of President Richard Nixon, \textit{The Agreement for a Permanent and Definitive Solution to the Colorado River Salinity Problem with Mexico: A Presentation before the Colorado River Water Users Association} (November 26, 1973), WRCA, Milton N. Nathanson papers, Carton 2, Folder 38, 9.}

This collaboration led to the creation of Minute 218 on March 22, 1965, a five-year agreement of provisional measures to temporarily improve water quality as much as possible until both nations could agree on more substantial, long-term solutions. Minute 218 consisted of a number of measures, including the construction of a bypass channel to circumvent the Morelos Dam and a series of drainage wells to allow for selective pumping of Wellton-Mohawk drainage water during different crop seasons.\footnote{Wastewater would be released in higher quantities during times of the year when Mexican water delivery was greatest (summer) and in lesser quantities at times when Mexico received the least of its allotment (fall, winter). This way, wastewaters could always be sufficiently diluted.}

Additionally, the United States pledged 40,000 AF (acre-feet) of additional water annually from the unpolluted Imperial Dam, in excess to the 1.5 MAFY Mexico received as a result of the 1944 Treaty. Under this initiative, the quality of water delivered to Mexico between 1962 and 1971 improved from an annual average of 1500 ppm to 1240 ppm.\footnote{M.B. Holburt, \textit{The 1973 Agreement on Colorado River Salinity Between the United States and Mexico} for the National Conference on Irrigation Return Flow Quality Management (Fort Collins, Colorado: Agricultural and Chemical Engineering Department, Colorado State University, 1977), WRCA, Milton N. Nathanson papers, Carton 2, Folder 40, 327.} Though not designed as a permanent settlement of Salinity Crisis negotiations between the United States and Mexico, Minute 218 provided several temporarily
satisfactory measures to alleviate the strains placed on small-time Mexicali farmers by highly saline waters.

As the five years of Minute 218 began to come to a close in November of 1970, the United States proposed an extension of the amendment for another five years. The Mexican presidency at the time of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz acquiesced to the prolongation of Minute 218 offered by the presidency of Richard Nixon. However, Díaz Ordaz agreed only in word in anticipation of the forthcoming presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez, to begin in December of that same year.

*Echeverría: Salinity as National Identity*

Mexico’s actions and attitudes in this case [of the Salinity Crisis] are quite in harmony with the new Mexican profile which the Echeverría Administration seems determined to create – a nationalistic Mexico, which has identified its interest with those of developing countries, and apparently feels a necessity to show its citizenry it will aggressively press its case in all matters in which it is in disagreement with the United States.\(^{114}\)

With the advent of the Echeverría presidency, a new tone modulated U.S.-Mexico relations. Just as the above excerpt from a State Department assessment of Salinity Crisis negotiations suggests, President Echeverría associated Mexican interests with the developing world and Central America more than with the United States. Diverging from Kennedy’s vision of a united Western Hemisphere, Echeverría sought to establish himself as a leader capable of aggressively lodging complaints against the overpowering U.S. While campaigning for president in 1969, Echeverría met with Mexicali cotton farmers

for twelve hours to discuss their foremost concerns, particularly the quality of their Colorado River water. That same year, the Comité General reunited to vigorously oppose the renewal of Minute 218, which left many farmers dissatisfied with water quality improvements and without compensation for their losses due to saline waters.\(^{115}\) Seeing the Salinity Crisis as an opportunity to enhance his self-image as a defender of Mexican interests against the exploitive United States, Echeverría refused the renewal of Minute 218 when he ascended to the presidency, distinguishing himself from the conciliatory former President Díaz Ordaz. In its place, Echeverría demanded a new addendum that would provide permanent solutions to water quality but allowed the extension of Minute 218 for a short interim period until the nations could reach a more definitive agreement.

The Echeverría administration differed greatly from that of the preceding Díaz Ordaz government, using inflammatory language to incite U.S. responsiveness. Echeverría addressed the U.S. Congress in 1972 with the following words: “It is impossible to understand why the United States does not use the same boldness and imagination that it applies to solving complex problems with its enemies [referring to U.S. efforts in Vietnam] to the solution of simple problems with friends [referring to Salinity Crisis negotiations with Mexico].”\(^{116}\) The Secretary General to President Echeverría questioned “how a country which can put a man on the moon can fail to find the means to reduce effectively the salinity of waters in a given river basin.”\(^{117}\) Such accusatory language brought to the forefront of discussions just what the United States hoped to obfuscate from public memory: the U.S. denial at the onset of the crisis and the delays caused by the Basin States.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 60-61.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., 109.
This very open display of displeasure by the Echeverría administration challenged the Nixon presidency to find a permanent solution to the crisis as soon as possible. The Nixon administration recognized the importance of reaching agreement with Echeverría in order to avoid jeopardizing other agreements with Mexico and to repair at least part of the fallen image of the United States, facing much global scrutiny for its foreign policy at the time.\textsuperscript{118}

Further, in order to combat increased salinity, both nations engaged in large-scale groundwater pumping. In 1944 when the Mexican Water Treaty was signed, groundwater was largely a non-issue. However, with increased scarcity of Colorado River water and concerns over water quality, both the Yuma and Mexicali Valleys began digging wells to supplement their allotments, drawing water from the same underground reservoir.\textsuperscript{119} U.S. parties recognized the need to solve the Salinity Crisis with Mexico in order to define groundwater rights before a pumping war between the valleys depleted the underground aquifer water. Thus, it was in the best interests of the United States for multiple reasons to reach a fast and permanent solution with Mexico.

By this time, the Nixon presidency no longer focused on unifying the Western Hemisphere through the Alliance for Progress nor valued the revolutionary spirit that the Mexican campesino epitomized as Kennedy had. Regarding Echeverría’s attitude toward salinity, a memorandum exchanged between the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior, and U.S. Section of the IBWC read:

\textsuperscript{118} U.S. officials feared that further delay in an agreement with Echeverría could jeopardize the recent success with the Chamizal agreement and with U.S. drug abatement on the border. Additionally, Ward writes, “Given the level of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that President Nixon and the State Department adopted a minimalist approach in resolving the salinity crisis;” Ward, \textit{Border Oasis}, 108-109, 119.

\textsuperscript{119} The reservoir in question was the U.S. Yuma Mesa Reservoir; Ibid., 106.
Recent years have witnessed the issue escalated by the Echeverría Administration in terms of the time allowed for the solution, the quality of the water demanded, and internal political importance. Mexico for reasons of its own has chosen to make what heretofore was a regional problem into a national Mexican issue, and, by Mexican definition, the principal issue in U.S.-Mexican relations.\textsuperscript{120}

This statement, though illustrative of Echeverría’s use of salinity as a political platform, also misrepresents the long-standing significance of the crisis for the Mexican nation.  

Campesinos, from the onset of their protests, engaged the national citizenry in their grievances. The Salt Caravan to Mexico City epitomizes campesino efforts to engage the heart of the nation in a local agrarian dispute and the mass distribution of the publication “La Sal” displays initiative by Mexicali residents to sustain that engagement throughout the duration of the crisis. The document referenced above continues:

Although the average Mexican may not be deeply concerned over the salinity problem, he would readily accept it as one more example of what he understands to be the United States’ willful mistreatment of its smaller and poorer neighbor. Mexican public opinion is definitely behind President Echeverría, and, ignorant of the technical and legal complexities underlying the problem, shares his belief that Mexico should receive a quality of water similar to that delivered to the United States’ users just across the international boundary.\textsuperscript{121}

Certainly, the general Mexican public felt outraged by Yuma wastewater practices of which the United States failed to inform Mexico. Mexicans regarded the United States as prejudiced against Mexico, unconcerned with the fate of its downstream neighbors and focused solely on the benefits of such wastewater practices to their own citizenry. Surely initial U.S. denial emphatically confirmed such feelings from the disadvantaged party, which by definition included the greater Mexican nation that suffered the loss of Mexicali as a prime agricultural center and much of the water guaranteed under the 1944 Treaty.

\textsuperscript{120} Federal Interagency Task Force, “Political Issues Between the United States and Mexico Associated with the Colorado River Salinity Problem,” (A-2).
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
These comments reflect the Nixon administration’s misunderstanding of the U.S.-Mexico dynamic as perceived by those across the border. Quite apart from Mexican leadership, the Mexican people very consistently considered the inequity of water quality between the Imperial, Yuma, and Mexicali valleys unacceptable and made their opinions known to both their domestic government and to the United States.

President Echeverría admittedly did bring the Salinity Crisis even more to the forefront of Mexican politics in order to promote himself. However, though accused by the U.S. State Department of provoking an outbreak of anti-American hostility, Echeverría simply built on existing nation-wide disapproval of U.S. actions for personal advantage. The Salinity Crisis was a national Mexican issue, even the principal concern in U.S.-Mexican affairs, long before the Echeverría presidency. The Nixon administration’s analyses delegitimized the nationwide efforts by campesinos and their allies to vocalize and advocate for a permanent solution to salinity.

Brownell and a Permanent Solution

Because of such tensions between the two presidents, nearly two years passed before Nixon and Echeverría met and formulated Minute 241. Though only effective from July 14 through December 31 of 1972, the new minute required that the United States bypass wastewater at twice the rate than it had under Minute 218, again without charging the bypassed water against the Mexican allotment, and overall reduced the salinity of Mexico’s diversion by 100 ppm.\(^2\) Still, Minute 241 failed to provide long-term solutions to the problem of salinity.

\(^{122}\) Minute 241 stipulated that the United States bypass wastewater at an annual rate of 118,000 AF; Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior, *Resolution of the United States-Mexico Colorado River Salinity*
Finally, in August of 1972, President Nixon appointed former Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. as his special representative to lead a Task Force specifically with the aim of finding permanent and effective solutions to salinity. The Task Force consisted of “working level representatives from a number of the major departments of government.” The members visited the Yuma Valley and also met with the Committee of Fourteen, representatives of the Basin States. Brownell conferred with Mexican officials, including President Echeverría and Mexican Foreign Secretary Emilio Óscar Rabasa, in addition to experts and citizens in both Mexico City and the Mexicali Valley. A year after their initial appointment, Brownell and his Task Force witnessed the signing of Minute 242, a permanent solution to the Salinity Crisis based on their research.

The terms of Minute 242 guaranteed a quality standard for the Mexican water supply from the Colorado, a convention the United States had avoided conceding throughout the Salinity Crisis. Even when engaging in temporary solutions to salinity, the United States had consistently refuted the idea of ever formalizing a quality threshold of its water obligation to Mexico. Minute 242 specified water headed for Mexico must meet an annual salinity of no more than 115 ppm more than the water of the Imperial Dam, the diversion point for U.S. agriculture along the border, with a potential fluctuation of plus or minus 30 ppm. In order to achieve said quality standard, the United States agreed to continue bypassing 118,000 AF annually of wastewater, extend the concrete-lining of the

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Wellton-Mohawk drain at the expense of the United States,\textsuperscript{124} limit groundwater pumping, and support Mexican efforts to obtain funding for rehabilitating Mexicali lands with new infrastructures. Further, the United States committed to building the largest and most expensive desalination plant in existence anywhere in the world with a construction cost of $120 million, which by its completion in 1993 had more than doubled.\textsuperscript{125}

Though the U.S. had long insisted that both nations abide by the unchangeable 1944 Treaty, the United States agreed to Minute 242, which modified the water-sharing obligation between the two nations on the issue of water quality. However, in this success for the Mexicali campesino and the Mexican nation and federal government, one element Mexico brought to the negotiation table failed to make the final resolution: “The agreement [did] not require any payments to Mexico for any past damages.”\textsuperscript{126}

In a speech given before The Colorado River Water Users Association, Brownell justified the conditions of Minute 242 to perhaps his most difficult U.S. audience, the representatives of the Seven Basin states whose constituents would be directly affected by the Minute’s conditions. On the matter of paying Mexico for past damages due to saline waters, Brownell explained why he refused to address this concern: “My instructions were to find a solution to the problem, not to become a party to a damage suit.”\textsuperscript{127} This was perhaps the only failure of Minute 242 for the Mexican parties involved and the most important concession gained by the United States.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{124} The United States financed the lining of the drain in both U.S. and Mexican regions.
\textsuperscript{125} The project cost a total of $260 million; Brownell, \textit{The Agreement for a Permanent and Definitive Solution to the Colorado River Salinity Problem with Mexico}, 8; Ward, \textit{Border Oasis}, 118.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 330.
\textsuperscript{127} Brownell, \textit{The Agreement for a Permanent and Definitive Solution to the Colorado River Salinity Problem with Mexico}, 4.
\textsuperscript{128} Defining how to assess the damages to Mexicali agriculture was extremely difficult. During these years of poor water quality, Mexicali also suffered damage due to insects and adverse weather conditions, not to mention feeble drainage infrastructure. Further, monetary damages “could vary from below $25 an acre-
Brownell in his address also sought to rationalize the concessions made to Mexico in the resolution of the Salinity Crisis, while illustrating the benefits of Minute 242 to U.S. Colorado water consumers. His commentary not only reveals U.S. objections to paying for Mexicali losses but also the changing landscape, primarily political and social, that called for changes in the U.S. policies on the Salinity Crisis and the allowances made to Mexico. Brownwell stated, “The interpretation we gave the 1944 Water Treaty, albeit historically correct in my opinion, was no longer tenable in a hypersensitive, environment-conscious world,” presenting an ecological argument for solving salinity.\textsuperscript{129}

With this statement, Brownell presented a new theme that would define future negotiations regarding Colorado River water and especially the Delta: ecology.

At the beginning of his speech, Brownell promptly addressed the struggles of negotiations with Mexico:

During the course of difficult but amiable negotiations, Mexican officials at times questioned that I was proposing a just solution. No doubt the same thought has occurred to some of you. That both sides look upon it with some dissatisfaction may be the only kind of reaction good compromise can expect. I hope it is a favorable omen for the settlement.\textsuperscript{130}

With these words, Brownell succinctly characterized the nature of negotiations between the United States and Mexico on numerous issues, certainly not on salinity exclusively, but at the same time aptly described the peculiarities of the borderland struggles between

\footnotesize{foot to possibly $100 an acre-foot, depending on whether value is calculated on the basis of crop yields, indirect economic and social benefits, or replacement cost;” Federal Interagency Task Force, “Sources of Salinity: (5) Effects in Mexico,” Options for Resolution of the US-Mexico Colorado River Salinity Problem (December, 1972), Part of Memorandum of Understanding between the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Section IBWC relating to Title I, Section 101(d) of Public Law 93-320 (June 24, 1974), “CO River Basin Salinity Control Act,” A-1, WRCA, Milton N. Nathanson papers, Carton 2, Folder 28, 7.}

\textsuperscript{129} Brownell, The Agreement for a Permanent and Definitive Solution to the Colorado River Salinity Problem with Mexico, 2.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
these two nations. Inextricably linked in numerous ways, in terms of economics, labor, geography, and water to name a few, the Yuma and Mexicali Valleys simultaneously fought to maintain their own identities and carry out their individual agendas. Yet, in the case of the Salinity Crisis, after much dispute and distrust over something so simple as water, complicated by something so intricate as a border, these two neighbors found resolution.
Conclusion

“[The] Good Neighbor policy should be the rule of behavior of the persons who inhabit the same valley; who look out over the same panorama; who see the sun rise and set at the same hour; who live on the same street, and many of whose children attend the same school or play the same sports.”\(^{131}\)

The Good Neighbor policy, wrote Mexican Senator Manuel Tello, should not merely be an agreement between two nations, should not merely be the talk of diplomacy, nor solely the terms of compromise. Neighbors live side-by-side and a good neighbor cares when a leak in his home causes a flood next door. Unfortunately, this sense of duty was a foreign concept in the American West, especially when it came to water. Individuals living doorsteps away sought to deprive their neighbors of the right to water in order to gain advantage, further their own agendas and create agricultural empires. Healthy competition in the frontier became the wolf in sheep’s clothing for apathy and blind self-interest. Once borderlines cut into the desert soil of the Colorado River Delta, nationalism further justified reckless abandon of good neighbor principles. The Salinity Crisis taught the United States and Mexico a lesson in good-neighborliness by reminding the border communities of these nations of their interconnectedness and unavoidable interdependency.

The crisis also exposed the overlooked environmental costs of large-scale irrigation in the Delta. Careless in their haste to transform sand into profit, early settlers exploited the land of the Delta without regard for its long-term implications. As both the agricultural production of the Yuma and Mexicali Valleys began to expand in the 1930s through the 1950s, irrigation practices led to the excessive accumulation of salts in both

\(^{131}\) Ibid.
regions. Farmers began to see and feel the costs of their exploitive land use policies when their crop productions began to fall. Suddenly, the natural environ and agriculture shared an imminent ill fate and all those involved in the Salinity Crisis were challenged to think in terms of preserving the Delta. Residents and their representatives could no longer concern themselves with the prospects of agriculture in the Delta without considering the toll their practices were taking on the natural landscape. Thus, the Salinity Crisis introduced preservationist language into discussions about the Delta’s future.

These revelations coincided with a burgeoning environmentalist movement that infected both nations beginning in the 1970s. To the states of the American West, concerned with both the diminishing quantity and quality of Colorado River water, the environmental movement proved directly applicable. A piece of litigation, Arizona vs. California, that occurred in the midst of the Salinity Crisis in 1964 demonstrated to the Basin States that their lavish overuse of Colorado River water was unsustainable, forcing them to refocus on preserving the water source and the lands adjacent the river. Arizona, less populated than California for many decades, did not use the extent of its Colorado River water allotment until the mid-nineteenth century. Eager to supply water to its ever-expanding farms and cities, California used both its allotment and the portion of Arizona’s annual allotment that Arizona was not using. Arizona successfully sued California in 1964, forcing California to live within its means and restrict its water usage to within its own allotment. With the fall of the most egregious offender of wasteful water practices, all of the Basin States began to reevaluate their water management and refocus their attentions on sustainable water usage, utilization of the Colorado River that would not lead to the eventual decline of their water quantity and quality.
The Salinity Crisis spanned two eras in water policy: an earlier era of exhaustive overuse of the Colorado River and a later period focused on sustainable use of the source in light of the environmental movement. Further, the conditions of Minute 242 forced the United States and Mexico to work collaboratively to solve the problems of water quality and quantity in addition to environmental sustainability in the Delta. Solutions to the Salinity Crisis set a new precedent in the way the United States and Mexico addressed the sharing of Colorado River water, ushering in a new era of partnership in the Delta defined by the co-sponsorship of mutually beneficial infrastructures. The Salinity Crisis as a case study in U.S.-Mexico relations in the 1960s and 1970s reveals how the presence of a national borderline created prejudice between peoples inhabiting the same geographic landscape. Nevertheless, by engaging in the laborious yet necessary discourse to resolve the Salinity Crisis, Americans and Mexicans altered the course of future Colorado River water usage in the arid West, prioritizing a more sustainable and good-neighborly future.
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