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Student Violence and Attitudes in Latin America

Note: This is an INR working draft on student violence and attitudes in Latin America. It was completed in mid-November 1968 and contains only information available as of that date.

The Nature of Recent Disorders

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Student disorders of unusual ferocity have plagued a number of Latin American nations since April 1968. Extensive property damage, hundreds of arrests and injuries and more than one hundred deaths have resulted from police/student clashes in Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay. Similar but less violent disturbances occurred in Bolivia, Chile, and in several other countries. Political tensions heightened in all five countries and--while tempers have cooled since October 1968--the present atmosphere remains unsettled and the possibility of renewed violence cannot be discounted.

Mexico. Of all the countries in Latin America Mexico has experienced the highest degree of student unrest. Massive demonstrations by Mexico's university students have troubled the Diaz Ordaz government since late July 1968 when communist youths celebrating the July 26 anniversary of Fidel Castro's revolution managed to take over a peaceful student demonstration which had been authorized by the government. When police tried to disperse the crowd, rioting students burned buses and barricaded a four-block area of downtown Mexico City. About 4,000 students again demonstrated on July 29, at which time federal troops were used to restore order after police lost control of the student mob. Press accounts of the deployment of tanks and armored cars against student barricades served to picture Mexico as a battleground, not unlike Paris during the disturbances in the Spring of 1968. Several Mexican students were killed and more than 200 were injured during these battles with security forces.

Demonstrations, accompanied by occasional violence, continued throughout August and September, with the number of participants approaching 100,000 at times. Student grievances at first focused upon local issues of police brutality, release of arrested students, and a recognition of university autonomy which was violated on July 29. Cries were raised

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For the dismissal of the chief of police and the mayor of Mexico City and some radical students attempted to enlist labor support for their cause by calling for a 40-hour week and better housing. By August 15, however, the first student animus against the President was evident, a criticism which reached unprecedented heights of scathing vulgarity (for Mexico) on August 27 when student poster attacks depicted Diaz Ordaz as dishonoring the Mexican Constitution and openly called for an end to his government.

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The student/government conflict grew in intensity and ferocity during September and October. With the October 12 opening of the Olympic Games fast approaching, the government seemed to abandon all hope of resolving the matter through negotiations and opted instead to use whatever force was necessary to put down what was then assuming the proportions of a student revolt. Such tactics had always worked in the past and the government probably assumed that they would be equally as effective again. Moreover, the timing of the student protests was linked to the Olympics and the continued agitation was extremely embarrassing to the Mexican Government which was most anxious to impress the world as a deserving host to the prestigious international games. The occupation of the national autonomous university by government forces on September 18 sparked new violence which continued intermittently until the bloody clashes on October 2 in which perhaps as many as 100 persons lost their lives. The October incident did considerable damage to Mexico's reputation as the most stable and progressive country in Latin America and brought into question the suitability of Mexico City as the Olympic site. Student agreement not to disrupt the games helped to cool tempers and an uneasy calm returned to student/government relations.

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Seeking to justify its actions and its inability to resolve the situation, the Mexican Government raised the specter of foreign elements and domestic communists who it alleged were responsible for student activism. The administration seemed not to realize that extremists, even with the aid of foreign elements, could hardly have sustained the unrest over such a long period if student dissatisfaction were not deep and widespread.

The positions of both sides are intransigent and it seems unlikely that a fundamental solution to the problem can be brought about without changing the widespread conviction that the PRI is entrenched, stagnant and primarily self-serving. Despite the enormous graft and dishonesty which have become PRI hallmarks, students will have to be convinced that the party is still, or will again become, a vital force for political and social change as well as economic growth.

Important conclusion, with warning based on failure to address underlying causes

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