

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

Clements' border bash

The no-shows hurt the border governors' meeting in Ciudad Juarez, but its Texas and Nuevo Leon sponsors beefed up their lobby.

Readers of this column will remember that in a tense meeting in Monterrey at the beginning of March, the governor of the state of Nuevo Leon, Alfonso Martinez Dominguez, and his Texas counterpart, Bill Clements, prevailed on President López Portillo to attend what was to be a gala first-ever parley of all ten U.S.-Mexico border governors—four on the U.S. side and six on the Mexican.

Well, the border conference came and went June 26-27, but there was no López Portillo. Three days before the event his office informed Clements that the President could not fit it into his schedule.

No love lost, apparently; Clements told the press that López Portillo's presence "would have somewhat dampened the proceedings." He hurried to say that this was because the security and protocol requirements would have been heavy, and anyway López Portillo "had no counterpart there"—just "us governors."

López Portillo was not the only no-show. Jerry Brown sent his regrets with a terse remark that "these kinds of meetings don't lead anywhere." Brown has tried in the past, through repeated pilgrimages to Mexico, to establish himself as the great peacemaker in U.S.-Mexico relations following President Carter's unrivaled record of disaster. He clearly resented Clements' bid to steal the mantle.

There was also no-show Robert Kreuger, Ambassador-at-Large and Special Negotiator for U.S.-Mexico Affairs. His absence was particularly noted since his counterpart from the Mexican Foreign Ministry, Andres Rozenhal, was there. But again, it didn't take a lot of political savvy to figure out the reason: bad feelings going back to Kreuger's unsuccessful senatorial race in 1978.

Add to this some astonishing statements on energy policy from both sides.

Cristobal Aldrete, the Oxford-accented Hispanic who heads the Southwest Regional Border Commission and was the highest Carter administration official present, garnered the 1980 "James R. Schlesinger Gas Negotiation Memorial Award" for his statement that "We cannot permit the Arabs to blackmail us. The U.S. and Mexico have as much or more oil than they do. Therefore it seems to me that we must put into effect a production policy between our two nations so that we are mutually self-sufficient."

Hardly less provocative was the proposal reported from Martinez Dominguez and Baja governor Roberto de la Madrid, to permit U.S. capital to invest in Mexican crude refining operations—strictly verboten under Mexico's nationalist laws on oil development.

But the day was far from lost

for the meetings' organizers.

First, sources close to Clements report the governor's satisfaction at being able to establish his "illegal alien" proposals at center stage in the quickening debate on the issue on both sides of the border. The central element in Clements' package is a "guest worker program" modeled on European experiences.

Secondly, the meeting gave further shape to an emerging "border lobby," of which Martinez Dominguez, Clements and de la Madrid are primary spokesman. The defining interest of the lobby is building up assembly plants and raw materials processing in border "free zone" environments. They don't usually mention it, but legalized gambling and such offshoots as gun- and dope-running are part of the same "Hong Kong East" package.

A faction in Mexico's Industries Ministry (SEPAFIN) last year tried to cut back on the assembly plant program, but a big "maquiladora" promotion fair hosted by the Mexican government in Nuevo Laredo last week makes it clear the green light stays on here.

It's in the raw material processing area that the big fight is brewing. The free zone advocates want to take Mexican energy at Mexico's cheap domestic prices and plug it into plants on the U.S. side, like a desalination plant in Brownsville, Texas that would ship water back to Monterrey.

López Portillo is known to view such arrangements as an erosion of sovereignty and potentially a national security threat. And this could have been part of his refusal to show up at Juarez last week.