

## Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

### Mexico's real corruption story

*"All too frequently, denouncing corruption is in itself a form of corruption," states López Portillo.*

One week before his Sept. 1 State of the Union speech, President José López Portillo sent a letter to the editor of *Uno más Uno* newspaper, announcing that he will reject a gift of a 60 hectare ranch that government officials from the State of Mexico had offered him. The Mexican president was responding to an article appearing earlier in that daily by columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, a leftist Jesuit who had threatened López Portillo with a corruption scandal if he accepted the present.

The news in all this is neither that a gift was offered, nor that the President turned it down; such happenings are commonplace in Mexico. What shocked many political observers here is that the Mexican president found it politically necessary to descend to the level of publicly refuting such cheap charges.

What motivated López Portillo, one of his PRI party allies told me, was not Granados Chapa's specific charge, but the dangerous environment in Mexico of growing "Watergate" and "corruption" scandals that is rocking the political boat with scarcely weeks left before the designation of López Portillo's successor. Already one big fish has fallen: Coahuila Governor Oscar Flores Tapia, who was forced to resign last month after being charged with corruption and financial malfeasance.

And a violent diatribe against López Portillo himself was issued a

few months back, in the form of a bestseller by Mauricio González de la Garza. The book in question has gained international notoriety for its unabashed mudslinging against the President's entire family, focusing the text on charges of "nepotism."

In short, Mexico's own version of Abscam and Brilab is beginning to blossom, with both the left and the right in the country jumping on the bandwagon to batter the PRI and the López Portillo government.

These forces have received succor, and substantial press coverage, from elements of the international media who are anxious to tarnish Mexico's image as a booming industrial economy. The Sept. 6 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, ran a lengthy article that applauded the fact that the Flores Tapia case "is making corruption a fashionable political issue." The *Times* went on to praise the special role of the Mexican press in this effort: "The unprecedented spectacle of an important Mexican politician coming to ruin because of a newspaper investigation," the *Times* reported hopefully, "has led some to believe that Mexico is finally taking corruption seriously."

The *New York Times's* Alan Riding, long an enemy of Mexico's modernization drive, also smelled blood in the Flores Tapia and Granados Chapa ranch cases, and saw an opportunity to reiterate his familiar attacks on Mexico's state

oil company, Pemex, on charges of corruption. In a Sept. 6 article (which we understand may be Riding's swan song, since it is rumored that he is about to be transferred to the Lima bureau), Riding explained that corruption was particularly prevalent in "drilling and other services for Petróleos Mexicanos, the vast national oil monopoly."

Riding was also particularly pleased over remarks made by López Portillo during his Sept. 1 State of the Union speech. The Mexican president departed from his prepared text to suggest that a law be adopted that would regulate gifts made to public officials. "The assembled congressmen, senators and cabinet ministers," Riding reports happily, "gave Mr. López Portillo a standing ovation for the initiative."

What reporter Riding fails to tell his readers, however, is that the Mexican president also used his State of the Union message to launch a scathing attack on those, like Riding, who would destabilize Mexico's institutions through corruption and scandal-mongering. Said the president:

"I know that we must wage a constant battle against corruption and assume the risk, as we have done so far, of scandal and blackmail and of dealing with those who criticize and proclaim their opposition while heating their own irons in our fire. Many first stones have been cast at public officials. Let us hope that those who cast them are themselves without sin. All too frequently, denouncing corruption is in itself a form of corruption. We are not saying this to make excuses, but rather to recommend an examination of conscience as a means of avoiding cynicism."