



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/politics/cal/la-me-arnold14nov14,1,1983579.story?coll=la-news-politics-california>

THE STATE

Governor, Mexico Far From a Good Fit

By Robert Salladay and Richard Boudreaux
Times Staff Writers

November 14, 2004

SACRAMENTO — Since his inauguration nearly a year ago, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has rallied U.S. troops in Germany, attended a state funeral in Austria, dined with the king of Jordan at his palace, toured ancient sites in Israel and joked with the Japanese prime minister in Tokyo.

But there is one conspicuous omission from his foreign sojourns: Mexico.

The globe-trotting governor — who is planning trips to Europe and China next year — has virtually ignored Mexico, California's biggest trading partner and a source of tension over immigration and environmental issues. Aides say he may take a one-day trip to Baja, but nothing comparable to the high-profile diplomatic excursion last week to Japan, the state's second-largest trading partner.

Although his films have been popular in Mexico, Schwarzenegger's political views have been derided there. For a year, Mexican media have hammered the governor for opposing driver's licenses for illegal immigrants in California, and the issue has reverberated throughout the country.

Two weeks ago, Mexican President Vicente Fox abruptly canceled a three-day trip to San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento that had been planned to start Nov. 29. Presidential aides said Fox wanted to discuss the driver's license issue but was told there would be no concessions from Schwarzenegger.

"President Fox would have returned home empty-handed on driver's licenses," said presidential spokesman Agustin Gutierrez Canet. "We decided to wait until the political conditions are better."

The relationship between California and Mexico has been a complex and shifting alliance colored by ethnicity, trade and political maneuvering on both sides of the border. Mexicans have been particularly sensitive about being respectfully portrayed by California politicians, and California politicians often use Mexican immigrants as political scapegoats or allies to court.

Mexican officials told the Schwarzenegger administration that the Fox trip had been canceled

because the president was busy with the national budget but that a meeting could occur next year. Margita Thompson, chief spokeswoman for Schwarzenegger, said relations between the countries had not chilled: High-level aides meet frequently, and the Department of Motor Vehicles is working with Mexico on coordinating databases.

"There is political will from both sides to meet, and we are just looking for a good date," said Thompson, a Latina with close ties to Mexico who also serves as a liaison with the country. "It would be doing a disservice to the binational relationship to say it's only defined by one issue [driver's licenses]. There are ties of commerce, culture and family that bind us together."

Thompson said Schwarzenegger was planning a trip to Mexico to meet with the Baja governor, though details remained sketchy.

Schwarzenegger seems to have damaged his relationship with Mexico by using the driver's license issue as a campaign theme last year, analysts said. When asked about it during the recall effort, Schwarzenegger replied on the radio: "You have to understand, I love Mexico. I have done four movies in Mexico."

His relationship with the nation contrasts sharply with that of former Gov. Gray Davis, who met with Fox eight times during his first term and referred to the Mexican president as a *compadre*. Davis was pointedly trying to contrast himself with his predecessor, former Gov. Pete Wilson, who had a chilly relationship with Mexico.

A year ago, between Schwarzenegger's election and inauguration, Mexican officials said Fox wanted to visit California and meet the new governor. Speaking to reporters at the time, Fox garbled the actor's name — it came out as "Schwarzenberger" — but said he hoped the two would get along.

Both Fox and Schwarzenegger have their own political considerations.

Schwarzenegger knows that most Californians, according to polls, do not want illegal immigrants to get driver's licenses.

Fox knows that a large segment of the Mexican population dislikes Schwarzenegger for a variety of reasons. One is the license issue. Another is that the governor has acknowledged voting for Proposition 187, the 1994 initiative — mostly struck down by the courts since — to cut off the bulk of public services to illegal immigrants. A third is that Schwarzenegger has hired associates of Wilson, the chief cheerleader for the initiative.

"It's very discouraging," said Guadalupe Gomez, a Santa Ana accountant who advises Mexico's foreign ministry on issues affecting Mexicans abroad. "The leaders of California and Mexico have a lot to discuss, not just on immigration but on trade, education and healthcare. Fox is looking at the relationship from a narrow, political viewpoint. He is missing opportunities."

As for Schwarzenegger, Gomez said, "you'd think that our governor would want to go down and look to improve economic ties with Mexico."

A lot of ordinary Mexicans think they know why Schwarzenegger has not visited them yet.

"It is clear that he has not come to Mexico because he is afraid," said Luis Galeana, 45, a

street vendor who was walking past the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City last week. "He hates Mexican immigrants and treats them badly. He would not be well-received here."

"Better that he go back to Hollywood and stop trying to obstruct relations between Mexico and California," said Carlos Montesinos, a 30-year-old computer engineer.

During the recall campaign, Schwarzenegger hammered Davis for signing the bill allowing illegal immigrants to get licenses, an issue that became a major topic on conservative talk radio in California — and in the Mexican media.

Schwarzenegger's election a year ago was not greeted with fanfare in Mexico. On election night, Televisa anchor Leonardo Kourchenko announced the candidate's victory as if presiding over a funeral. "I would like to give you different news about what happened in California, but these are the results," he said.

"It was if an enemy of Mexico had come to power," said Gordon Hanson, a professor of economics at UC San Diego and former co-director of the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies there. Hanson was in Mexico City the day Schwarzenegger was elected.

"There was a mixture of derision and disappointment," the professor said. "The most vehement response I encountered was among a group of working-class folks in Puebla, all of whom had relatives in the United States and saw the driver's license issue as crucially important."

Once in office, Schwarzenegger prodded the Democratic-controlled Legislature to immediately repeal the law, which it did.

The governor and others argued that easier access to state identification raised the potential of terrorists establishing footholds here.

Democratic lawmakers said illegal immigrants were going to drive anyway and should be required to take driving classes, get insurance and provide their fingerprints to authorities, as the license law demanded.

But they agreed to the repeal, in part because the bill's sponsor — state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles) — believed that the governor would later agree to a compromise.

Last week, Schwarzenegger said he might accept a specially colored license.

"It has to be a different color driver's license," he said, "so it's very clear — that says on it, 'Foreigner' or whatever, or 'Immigrant' or whatever, on it. It doesn't have to say, 'Illegal immigrant.' I'm not into that." If a compromise is reached, it probably won't come until next year.

Beyond the license issue, Schwarzenegger also angered Mexicans by vetoing a bill that would have allowed Californians of Mexican descent to sue for damages for being deported during the Depression.

From 1929 to 1944, California involuntarily returned Mexicans to their home country, ostensibly as a way to open jobs for citizens here. However, many critics regarded the policy as racist. Schwarzenegger said in his veto message that the opportunity to sue had long passed but suggested a reparations program that would require the Legislature's approval.

Now, given the unpopularity of the governor among Mexicans, "I am not sure it would be in President Fox's interest to seek out a special relationship with him," said Guadalupe Gonzalez, a professor of international studies at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching in Mexico City.

"And Schwarzenegger seems to think that a special relationship with Mexico is part of the Democratic Party's agenda, and he has abandoned that agenda," she added. As a result, "relations between California and Mexico have chilled."

For the most part, trade between the state and its southern neighbor occurs regardless of high-profile trips by public officials. As a budget-cutting move, California recently decided to close its 12 foreign trade offices, including one in Mexico City, after reports that many were taking credit for deals in which they had little or no involvement.

California exports about \$14.8 billion in products to Mexico, second only to Texas, according to U.S. Department of Commerce figures from 2003. The Public Policy Institute of California said California's exports to Mexico jumped 13% in the first half of 2004.

Nevertheless, there are important policy issues to discuss. Alejandro Diaz Bautista, an economist at Tijuana's College of the Northern Frontier, said several items on the cross-border agenda could advance more easily with Schwarzenegger's attention. They include efforts to attract U.S. investment to develop natural gas fields in northern Mexico, to share water from the Colorado River and to smooth the flow of legal Mexican migrants, whose labor is needed by California industries.

Kenn Morris — director of Crossborder Business Associates, a San Diego consulting firm — said the governor should visit Mexico soon so the relationship doesn't break beyond repair:

"I think what we have," Morris said, "is a window for Gov. Schwarzenegger to actually go forward and sustain those relationships, and that window is closing."

*

Salladay reported from Sacramento and Boudreaux from Mexico City.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2004 Los Angeles Times