

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

'A most inopportune visit'

His predecessor at the Department of Energy was never allowed to set foot in Mexico. After Mr. Duncan's visit, he, too, may be asked to stay away from now on...

The visit of U.S. Energy Secretary Duncan here early last this week was of interest in more ways than one. It came just two weeks after President Lopez Portillo announced a 10 percent increase in oil production. It is also a time when the U.S. is more and more writing off the Mideast—and eyeing the oil on its southern border.

Finally, it is the first time a U.S. Energy Secretary has been able to set foot on Mexican soil.

The first head of the department, James Schlesinger, was such a hated figure in Mexico for his sabotage of gas sales that he never dared appear in person, and his name was quietly dropped from the list of officials accompanying Carter in his visit here a year ago.

How much difference did the change in faces make?

Not much, according to knowledgeable circles. One Mexican official informed us that Duncan departed from Mexico "in a rage" because he left empty-handed, and made a fool of himself at a final press conference. He had nothing to say about his visit except a statement prepared in Washington ahead of time.

The official concluded, "It was a most inopportune visit."

The warning signals were up starting with a special DOE news release March 28, four days before the Secretary's arrival. The release accepted Mexico's new gas price of \$4.47 per metric cubic foot equal

to Canada's current price. But then the release stressed a series of key-and-code phrases which conjured up the worst of the Schlesinger days: the new price increase was only "temporary," pending "establishment of a more permanent pricing relationship" and "new discussions...to ensure a stable and equitable natural gas trade."

What this meant to the Mexicans was that faces had changed, but policy had not; the pressure remained to force Mexico back from its pricing policy. That policy turns on contracts which allow frequent revisions to keep prices equal or higher than prevailing world prices, short duration of contracts, and little lead-time notification before termination.

A "permanent pricing relationship" was not among the phrases Duncan used to describe what had been agreed to, as he emerged from his half hour meeting with the President. Just how clearly drawn the Mexican approach is on this and related issues came directly from the Mexican President as he wound up a tour of Baja California over the weekend. Lopez Portillo declared that "Mexico is no one's looting ground," but "rather a supplier which sells on the basis of its own development interests." He stressed that the primary focus of his talk with Duncan was the Mexican U.N. world energy proposal, which calls for cooperative approaches to solving

energy scarcity and condemns efforts toward "partial solutions" which favor only those nations with the force to make their own policies prevail.

The implicit slap at the U.S., with its elaborate build-up of special mobile forces more easily deployed to Mexico than anywhere else, was not lost on Duncan. The topic came up when he faced the Mexican press.

Although Duncan returned energy-less to Washington, he nonetheless fulfilled at least one of his objectives: to send a barely-veiled message to Europe and to Japan that the Carter government considers Mexico and its oil "in a special relationship with the United States." Duncan's deployment served as a warning to these other governments that they will only be permitted to negotiate with Mexico within the limits imposed by Washington. By obstinately demanding long-term price and contract conditions, knowing Mexico would say no, Duncan was telling France, West Germany and Japan: "pay no attention to Mexico's squawks. We view it as our preserve."

While taking Duncan's visit itself in stride, Mexican officials were looking over their shoulders at the deterioration of the Middle East. They know that further blow-up there will bring U.S. pressure down on them even more strongly than now. No nice phrases in Duncan's carefully-prepared press statements about "total support for Mexico's policy of self-determination" in oil policy can hide this fact. As a local columnist stressed this week, the U.S. arms spending pickup "brings us bad omens."