

## Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

### Goodbye to the Ali Baba of Acapulco

*The man who built up Mexico's drug, real estate speculation, and dirty-money sectors unfortunately leaves many heirs.*

On May 15, the day after Miguel Alemán Valdez died of stomach cancer, the elite of Mexico gathered to mourn the passing of the former president.

For three hours, the private TV network, Televisa, broadcast the proceedings throughout the country. Most of Mexico watched former presidents Luis Echeverría and José López Portillo, as well as current president de la Madrid, pay their last respects. Interior Minister Manuel Bartlett gave a eulogy on how Alemán had taken the cry for industrialization and made it into a reality during his 1946-1952 presidency.

Even Javier García Paniagua was there, visible on the cameras—the former president of the PRI who had broken all the rules of the game in his drive to capture the presidential nomination in 1981. He had not been seen publicly for a year, a wise policy in a political system which neither forgives nor forgets its renegades. His appearance at the service gave rise to the insistent whisper that he was “Alemán’s political godson.”

*El Heraldo* newspaper, owned by a former associate of Alemán’s, proclaimed Alemán “the best president Mexico ever had,” and there was a nostalgic air to the obituaries in the rest of press.

However, reality began to intrude with a veiled barb from Echeverría. Interviewed by Televisa, he declared that the most fitting memorial would be to rebuild the monument to Ale-

mán at the Ciudad Universitaria campus of the National University at the south of Mexico City.

It was not as innocent a suggestion as it sounded. Everyone there knew that a previous monument to Alemán on the site had been blown up twice with dynamite by students in the 1960s. It crossed more than a few minds that rebuilding it today would be an invitation to yet a third demolition.

The real dimensions of the man was conveyed by the wag’s epitaph, “Ali Baba has died—but not the 40 thieves.” The reference was to the group of drug runners, real estate speculators, dirty money launderers, and tourism moguls who rode to multimillion dollar fortunes on Alemán’s coattails in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For most of Mexico’s young population, this history has been dulled by the propaganda of the media empire set up by Alemán and his close cronies, an empire centered around the *Novedades* and *Heraldo* newspapers, and the all-powerful Televisa private TV monopoly.

Ever since his presidency three decades ago, Alemán has been acknowledged affectionately in international mafia circles as the father of the Mexican drug trade. During and after his presidency, he made a strenuous effort to legalize the casinos that President Lázaro Cárdenas had banished from the country in the late 1930s. Alemán’s efforts to reinstitute these centers of illegal money, drugs, weap-

ons, and prostitution, came to nought.

The eulogies focused on the limited consumer-import-substitution industrialization that occurred under his administration; yet Alemán preferred to be known as the father of “industry without chimneys”—Mexico’s tourist trade. It was Alemán who in the post-war period built up Acapulco as the golden spa of the rich, the glamorous, the sleazy, and the drugged.

It was also in Acapulco that Alemán hosted Henry Kissinger; he was such a good host that in the 1970s Henry decided to make Alemán’s home in Acapulco his annual February vacation retreat. It was on one of these trips that, according to the lore of the resort, Henry took a fancy to a youthful Romanian waiter—and smashed the waiter’s skull with a bottle when his attentions were rebuffed.

It is not known if Henry made it to the funeral.

Alemán’s death, at age 83, came two months after the passing of one of his closest and dirtiest cronies, Bruno Pagliai. A more or less penniless Pagliai had arrived from Argentina after World War II, only to hook up with Alemán, gain a concession at what is now the Tamsa steel works, and work his way up to a top position in international dirty money circuits (his name figured in the revelations about the fascist P-2 Masonic lodge in Italy).

In effect, the core of a generation has passed on, but not without leaving the spores of their moral and economic rot. Alemán’s son, Miguel Alemán Jr., one of Mexico’s wealthiest and most powerful men in his own right, has already broken new ground. For Televisa, which he heads, he has prescribed the use of clinical brainwashing techniques to instill in the population a Malthusian hatred of population and economic growth.