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**EXCISE**

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October 11, 1968

OFFICIAL-INFORMAL

Wallace W. Stuart, Esquire  
Counselor for Political Affairs  
American Embassy  
Mexico, D.F.

Dear Wally:

Now that there has been ample time for me to get some experience with the Washington reaction to the disorders in Mexico, I want to pass on some thoughts about political reporting. I recall a conversation on that subject we had last January, and on the basis of recent experience would now like to revise some of my observations at that time, particularly with regard to Embassy competition with the press services. I still believe it should not be the role of the Embassy to compete with the press services, but there are instances in which it is forced on you.

In the case of press coverage of an isolated event in Mexico - something unconnected with a major trend - it is possible for me to hold to the position that you will comment when you can and feel it useful to do so. This position will not hold up for a major development which has successfully claimed the attention of top-level Washington bureaucracy. When an issue becomes so prominent that it receives front-page play in the New York Times for several days in a row, the automatic response at the Assistant Secretary level and above is to ask for confirmation or correction of news reports from Embassy sources. If it is not available, they immediately ask "Why".

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Date: 2/6/98

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The divergences among various news sources such as the wire services, Christian Science Monitor and the Times also generate pressure for Embassy reporting, for the Departmental principals usually will ask which of the press reports is correct. Another pressure for reporting is generated by that coming from other Embassies with roughly similar problems. For instance: if Montevideo and La Paz are reporting copiously on student demonstrations which are receiving similar publicity to those in Mexico, there is a tendency to look for a similar volume of reporting from Mexico. I agree that it is largely irrelevant to expect the Embassy's reporting patterns to comply with the editorial judgment of the newspapers, but there seems to be an inevitable tendency to do so.

One problem associated with reporting only when a clear-cut need therefor is apparent is that this tends to leave the field to the competition, [ ] This was a large problem for us in Bolivia. Fortunately, in Mexico there do not seem to be divergences on fundamental policy questions [ ]

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Doubtless, the problem of alarmism has been prominent in your thoughts these past two months. Here is another area in which giving attention to alarming reports which you believe do not merit it must be weighted against the problems arising from lack of comment thereon by the Embassy when other news media are reporting them, sometimes in exaggerated fashion.

A good example of what I mean was the question of the number of deaths in one of the earlier shooting events. One wire service reported the number as 15, and this figure, although unsubstantiated, was widely played here and gained some acceptance because it was unrebutted. We went to some lengths to keep the question in perspective, emphasize the lack of substantiation for this count, and were eventually bailed out by a later wire service report that only 5 persons had been killed. It would have been helpful if the Embassy had cited the various figures (assuming you see the wire service reports) and expressed whatever reservations you may have had.

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Since you are unavoidably in competition with the press in crises, it is important to be able to give it careful attention. The PAF Press Clips are very good for that purpose, but I have wondered if your service is rapid enough to be useful. If delay in receipt of Press Clips is a problem, let me know so I can look into faster service.

It is interesting to observe the lag in the reaction of the Federal bureaucracy in responding to the violence in Mexico. For the first few weeks it was dismissed as an instance of conventional Latin political effervescence and the intelligence agencies gave it little attention. The preparation of the SNIE for the Nixon visit required that the U.S. Intelligence Board, take formal notice of Mexican events and that, together with the October 2 massacre, resulted in all the intelligence agencies substantially increasing their coverage of, and output on, Mexico. Consequently the White House is now receiving a far larger volume of reporting - mostly alarming - than they did three weeks ago. The FBI reports are a case in point here, and they create difficulties when we are asked for comment on reports we have not seen, or on which we have no elements of judgment.

My conclusion from all this has been that in situations in which the Washington community develops an intense interest, it is virtually impossible for the Embassy to over-report, and an aggressive reporting activity is essential if the Embassy is to maintain its influence and credibility. I hope to explore this with you in greater detail during a visit in December, but in the meantime will be looking forward to any comments you have.

Best regards,

Sincerely,

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Maxwell Chaplin  
Country Director  
Office of Mexican Affairs

cc: Minister Dearborn

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ARA/MEX:MChaplin:md 10/11/68