

Mr. Ambassador breaks a tradition

A&M grad greets America's visitors

By LIZ NEWLIN
Battalion Editor

Usually a very wealthy, middle-aged man has his job — a man who is socially "well-connected."

Lalo is not.

He is the son of a migrant farm family from Floresville, about 30 miles southeast of San Antonio.

Abelardo Lopez "Lalo" Valdez, 37, is chief of protocol of the United States and has the rank of ambassador.

It's his job to take care of foreign chiefs of state and heads of governments when they are in America.

Valdez, who graduated from Texas A&M in 1964 with a degree in civil engineering, said President Jimmy Carter had definite reasons for his non-traditional selection.

"I believe Carter picked me because he wanted someone who could do the job and do it well," Valdez said in an interview last weekend.

"Secondly, he wanted to have a different kind of person, from a different culture, with language ability."

Valdez did not learn to speak English until he was in the third grade, but now even most of his Texas accent is gone.

"Carter was trying to recognize through me a very large Hispanic community," he continued, one that had not been recognized at all until the Georgian's administration. Valdez said the United States has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the Western Hemisphere, which is just now coming into its own economically and politically.

Valdez has been in a good position to observe that growth in this nation and others. From mid-1977 until his appointment in late September, he supervised the U.S. economic aid programs throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The United States will become more dependent on Latin America for trade, he says, because the countries offer markets that will grow. Already the Latin American markets translate into employment for one of three farms and one of eight manufacturing jobs here.

Hispanics are vital, he contends, because they can act as "two-way translators," something that has been missing in Anglo-Hispanic relations.

"With their commonalities and struggle for economic development, they can relate successfully with Latin America," the ambassador said.

"You just have to look at the history of Latin American relations to see the numerous misunderstandings between the two sides." Some of the conflicts and suspicions were generated by cultural differences that American-Hispanics would understand, he said.

The Carter administration has tried to remedy that void by appointing several Hispanic judges and other officials.

"The president generally has a high priority for Latin America," the ambassador said, citing the Panama Canal issue as an example. Carter stuck his neck out to support returning the Panama Canal even though it was politically unpopular.

The U.S. legislature has also recently taken a kinder view of Latin America.

"The Congress did pass legislation which I was sort of instrumental in getting," he said. The act states "the sense of the Congress" is that America shall place high priority on both private and public funding for Latin America and the Caribbean.



Ambassador "Lalo" Valdez, '64, here to see the Texas game, answers questions at a press conference.

Battalion photo by Clay Cockrill

"Beautiful language," Valdez said, explaining that Congress had not made similar statements about what the country ought to invest in.

Before the legislation and in the 10 years before Carter, "transitional developing countries" in Latin America had seen U.S. government aid budgets, budget cut from \$600 million to less than \$200 million.

During that time, international policymakers said the Latin American countries no longer needed assistance.

"They were all wrong," said Valdez, who has written numerous scholarly articles on the subject. Even though Latin American per capita income was about \$550, and half the world was below the \$250 poverty line, U.S. per capita income was about \$9,000. Latin America was not in the middle class as claimed.

"I couldn't figure that out," he said. The nations are in a critical situation economically and, in some cases, politically.

"We are fooling ourselves to believe that (the countries don't need help) and not make an investment."

While he was the chief Latin American economic officer, Valdez persuaded many businessmen and local governments to offer assistance, often for their own benefit.

Again, he says his major achievement was the Congressional recognition of the need.

"Before, they were kind of cutting, cutting, cutting."

To aid the bill in Congress, he helped build a constituency for the act from the Hispanic community, chambers of commerce and labor

unions.

But the understanding these countries need help must reach more people.

"We need to increase the awareness of the American public of the interdependence. That's why I'm so excited about the initiative A&M has taken," he said, echoing his statement at a press conference earlier in the weekend.

"This President Jarvis Miller is trying to put A&M on the world map."

Texas A&M has a great opportunity to enter the international sphere by training students and involving faculty in the new International Center, he said.

"I hope to be of some assistance to students," he says, "to give advice and moral support."

And this is where Latin American affairs and Valdez' new job link back together.

"I hope to be bringing some ambassadors here, as well as to other parts of the state."

He proposes a "visiting ambassadors" program that would get the foreign representatives out of Washington, D.C., and into the countryside.

The ambassadors would gain a better perspective of America, and Texas A&M would be a good place to bring them, Valdez said.

"You can't tell people about Texas A&M. They have to experience it," he said, reflecting on his alma mater.

"I feel so indebted about the benefits it gave me," the ambassador said. "I hope my children will attend A&M."

After Texas A&M and being commissioned in the U.S. Army, he was assigned to duty at the White House and became interested in international affairs.

Then he earned law degrees at Baylor and Harvard universities, rare for Hispanic students in those days, and worked in private international law before entering the government.

"All of this helped to develop, one, an ability to deal with other cultures, languages, and two, to deal with very important people."

Confidence is important to the chief of protocol; if he freezes, he can't function.

"You realize presidents and kings are people too," Valdez said, a veteran of two months.

"Protocol is really common courtesy and common sense in dealing with other people."

But one of his first major assignments, greeting Pope Paul II, was uncommon.

Valdez, his wife and Mrs. Carter flew to Boston to greet the pope.

"When we got to the top of the stairs (of the airplane), there was the pope, surrounded by bishops.

"I felt like I had walked in on a scene in the Vatican," said Valdez, a Roman Catholic.

"It was such a dramatic meeting. He has the body of a very powerful person and such a sweet face — it's such a contradiction."

"The first words he said were, 'America ... it's a strange place.'" It was in perfect English, Valdez remembered.

"It threw me completely off-stride."

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