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By Joel Bleifuss

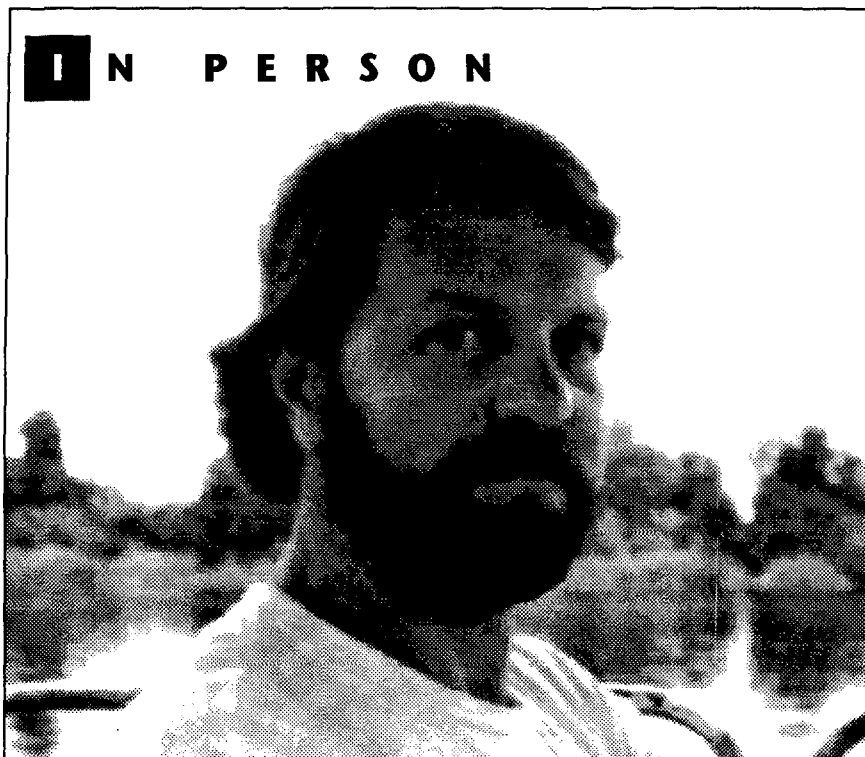


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IN PERSON

EYES ON THE PRI

Jorge Castañeda emerges as the leading critic of Mexico's ruling party

he chose a riskier course: In a country where government opponents are continually harassed and sometimes killed, Castañeda, 42, is one of the most eloquent and unyielding critics of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has clung to power in Mexico since 1929.

Despite the PRI's interminable efforts to co-opt its adversaries on the intellectual left, Castañeda—along with such figures as Lorenzo Meyer, Adolfo Gilly, Elena Poniatowska and Adolfo Aguilar Zinser—has maintained his integrity as an independent analyst. His regular column in the muckraking weekly magazine *Proceso* is essential reading for the intelligentsia, while 25,000 copies of his most recent collection of essays, *Sorpresas te da la vida*, were devoured by a Mexican public increasingly disgusted with official propaganda.

Aided by his flawless English, Castañeda has in recent years become the leading Mexican voice in the U.S. media, supplanting the eminent literary figures Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes. His regular column in the *Los Angeles Times* and his articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Atlantic Monthly* reveal him to be a shrewd commentator on U.S.-Mexican relations, as well as the closest thing the Mexican opposition has to a U.S. spokesman.

It's a dual role Castañeda takes seriously. Unlike Fuentes, he was a vociferous critic of the North American Free Trade Agreement from the beginning, and he used his clout in the U.S. press, as well as his connections to Washington policy-makers, to attack the treaty. The Mexican government considers him a serious threat and on at least one occasion tried to have his column removed from the op-ed page of the *Los Angeles Times*.

After completing his doctorate in economic history at the Sorbonne,

Born into a prominent family, educated at Princeton and the Sorbonne and fluent in four languages, Jorge G. Castañeda could have opted for a career in the Mexican foreign service. Instead,

Juiced up

If only O.J. Simpson had driven his white Bronco off into the sunset—or off a cliff—the world might be a better place.

Between January 1 and September 29, the evening "news" programs on ABC, CBS and NBC devoted 1,392 minutes (23.2 hours) to covering the O.J. Simpson trial. Those figures were compiled by the *Tyndall Report*, which provides a weekly account of how the networks fill their 20-minute daily news hole. In fact, the Simpson trial exceeded the combined coverage of the war in Bosnia and the Oklahoma City bombing, which, with a total of 1,292 minutes, have been the second and third most covered stories of the year. But, perhaps most disturbing, the network's reporting on the four major stories about the Gingrich revolution—the convening of the 104th Congress, attempts to balance the federal budget, restructuring welfare and cutting Medicare—received only 46 percent as much time as the trial.

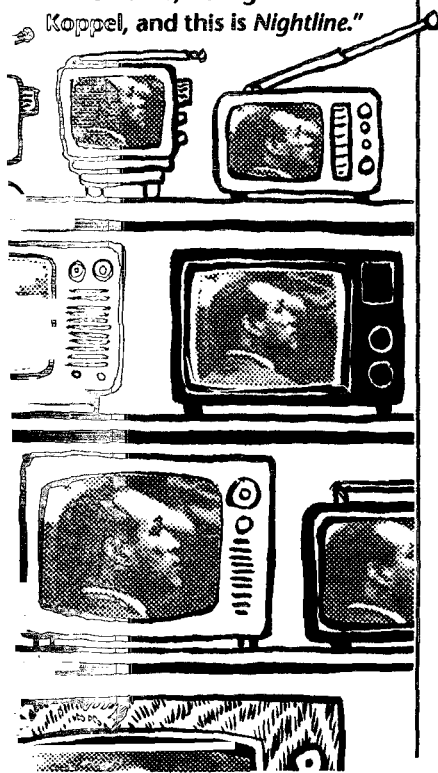
How do the networks rank? During the 9-month period, low-brow NBC News devoted 14.6 percent of its news coverage to O.J., CBS expended 12.5 percent of its time on the trial and ABC gave it a scant 9.1 percent.

All three evening news shows were topped by the pre-eminent late night news program, ABC's *Nightline*. Since June 17, 1994—the night O.J. began taking the country on a ride—*Nightline* has devoted 49 programs to the sordid Simpson saga, or 14.8 percent

of its programming. "Don't you think that's a bit excessive?" I asked *Nightline* publicist Eileen Murphy. "Obviously we don't, or we wouldn't have done it," she replied.

Nightline's obsession with Simpson reached its peak during the first 100 days of Congress, when Gingrich and company were ushering the United States into the Third World. According to *Extra!*, the publication of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, between January 23 and March 15 *Nightline* devoted 45 percent of its programming to the trial. According to *Nightline's* Ted Koppel, one of the "virtues" of a television news system where ratings determine coverage is that the public decides what it wants. As he told the *American Journalism Review's* Jacqueline Sharkey, "If people are really tired of it, don't watch it, turn it off. You will be amazed at how quickly the networks get the message."

Imagine: "Good evening, I'm Geraldo, sitting in for Ted Koppel, and this is *Nightline*."



Castañeda returned to Mexico in 1978 and joined the Mexican Communist Party, which he left in 1980. But his main activity from 1979-82 was the unpaid collaboration he undertook with his father, who was then Mexico's foreign minister, to bring about a peaceful resolution to the civil war in El Salvador. Working closely with French writer and diplomat Régis Debray, Castañeda helped to draft the 1981 Franco-Mexican declaration on El Salvador, which called for the inclusion of the insurgent Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in any peace negotiations. The declaration also served to bring international legitimacy to the rebel cause.

When Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a young, Harvard-educated economist, was chosen to succeed President Miguel de la Madrid, Castañeda agreed to be an adviser to Salinas' campaign. A few days before the July 1988 election, when it became apparent that a left-wing challenger, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, was about to win at least a quarter of the vote, Castañeda severed his ties to the Salinas team.

"I thought that many of the things [Salinas] wanted to do were the right things for the country, and I had a generational and personal proximity to them," Castañeda says, reflecting on his brief association with the PRI. "I was convinced at the time that there was no other way. That obviously was a mistake."

Many observers believe that Cárdenas won the election, but the PRI's machinations ultimately deprived him of victory. Following the contest Castañeda became an unpaid, occasional adviser to Cárdenas and stepped up his frontal assault on government corruption and unaccountability, a crusade he continues today.

Castañeda paid a price for breaking with the Salinas administration. In June 1990, shortly after he began to assail the proposed NAFTA agreement, his secretary was stopped on two occasions by armed men who told her that Castañeda would be killed unless his criticism of the government ceased. The death threats created a political firestorm in Mexico and prompted a front-page article in the *New York Times*. President Salinas phoned him from Japan to express his "solidarity in the face of this unacceptable incident." But the PRI's official newspaper, *El Nacional*, dismissed the affair, stating in an editorial that the threats against Castañeda "remained exclusively in the realm of his imagination."

Castañeda's American reputation rests on his discerning, elegantly written book, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1993. *Utopia Unarmed* is both an elegiac history and a detailed, cogently argued blueprint for Latin America's transformation along social-democratic lines. Twenty or even 10 years ago, its reformist thesis would have generated outrage in leftist circles. But in light of recent history, Castañeda's program is a humane, even utopian, prescription for a region presently reeling from neoliberal excesses.

In early November, the New Press will publish Castañeda's latest book, *The Mexican Shock*, an analysis of the tumultuous and convoluted events that swept the country in 1994: the Chiapas uprising, the murder of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the presidential election of August 21 and the devaluation of the peso in December. Largely a postmortem on NAFTA, *The Mexican Shock* suggests that the country's problems did not originate in the trade agreement, nor will its hopes for a better future end with it. Though the treaty is irreversible, Castañeda argues, it can still be molded into an "instrument for growth with justice, for democracy within the rule of law, to help consolidate whatever sovereignty we have left, and to struggle against the intolerable corruption that plagues the country more than ever."

—Scott Sherman