



## The Chamizal Convention (Treaty) of 1964

*The right presidents, the right diplomats, the right Boundary Commissioners, and the right attitudes of the two cities made it [the Chamizal Convention of 1964] possible – Nestor Valencia, Chief Planner for the City of El Paso in the 1960s*

In the early 1960s the Chamizal dispute, which involved both the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island, had reached nearly 100 years with no resolution. The Chamizal tract was originally a Mexican tract of land that bordered the Rio Grande. A huge flood in 1864 altered the course of the Rio Grande and thus altered the Chamizal tract—it went from being exclusively on the Mexican side to being exclusively on the U.S. side of the river. Did the U.S. own the Chamizal tract or did Mexico? This question was a chronic thorn in the relationship between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Cordova Island was essentially a Mexican enclave inside the U.S. It was a Mexican piece of land surrounded on three sides by the United States. Cordova Island was covered in desert shrubs and did not have a definitive international border. As a result, the island was a “no man’s land”; drug traffic, illegal immigration, booze, and blood were the signatures of the island. However, the Chamizal Convention (treaty) of 1964 finally ended the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island conflicts. This essay will discuss how the Chamizal dispute (the term given to the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island problems collectively) was resolved.

Many government officials as well as regular citizens from both nations helped to make the Chamizal Convention of 1964 a reality. Six key players in the Chamizal Convention of 1964 are as follows: Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos;

American Presidents John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) and Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ); U.S. Department of State Ambassador to Mexico Thomas Mann; and the two commissioners of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), Joseph Friedkin of the U.S. Sector and David Herrera Jordan of the Mexican Sector, respectively.

The beginning of the end of the Chamizal dispute came in 1962 when President López Mateos of Mexico asked President Kennedy to meet with him in Mexico City. JFK agreed and flew down to Mexico’s sprawling capital. The presidents discussed many things but specifically they discussed Cold War politics. Indeed, the 1960s was the heart of the Cold War era, a time when the Soviet Union and the United States were fighting each other in every way except direct warfare. This was a time when the two superpowers were challenging each other economically, politically, militarily, and ideologically. Regarding military, politics, and economy, it was like the U.S. and the Soviet Union were playing a game of chess in which they kept moving their pieces across the world game board but never put their king in checkmate. Ideologically, to be blunt, it was U.S. “democracy” versus Soviet Union “communism.”

Mexico is the United States’ large southern neighbor; for Mexico to turn communist would be a direct threat to U.S. national security. JFK went down to visit the Mexican president to improve relations between the two



The flags of the United States and Mexico fly high at Chamizal National Memorial. The two nations came together in 1964 and peacefully settled their century-long border dispute.

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countries and ultimately make sure a Mexican-Soviet alliance did not form. President López Mateos told Kennedy that if the U.S. President really wanted to make things better between the U.S. and Mexico, then the two countries needed to figure out a solution to the old Chamizal dispute. The presidents made an agreement: the Chamizal dispute must be peacefully settled, now.

Immediately, IBWC Commissioners David Herrera Jordan of Mexico and Joseph Friedkin of the U.S. began working “very hard to come up with an agreement [on the Chamizal dispute] that both sides would agree on” (Nestor Valencia, Interview with Michelle Gomilla, Chamizal Oral History Project, UTEP, March 8 and April 20, 1994). In fact, Jordan, Friedkin and the IBWC officials working under them were the ones that created, wrote, and finalized the Chamizal Convention.

We’ve briefly discussed four of the six key players in the Chamizal Convention, leaving us with Thomas Mann and President Johnson. When JFK was asked to meet the Mexican President in Mexico City, he really didn’t know much about the Chamizal dispute and its history and drama. Kennedy called on U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Thomas Mann to enlighten him on the subject. Mann was extremely educated on the Chamizal dispute as he had held various positions in the U.S. Department of State Latin America Sector since 1943. Moreover, Mann had taken several trips to El Paso in the 1950s with the primary goal of resolving the Chamizal dispute.

What about LBJ? Tragically, while driving through downtown Dallas in his motorcade in 1963, JFK was assassinated. JFK’s Vice President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, became President of the United States of America. Johnson swore that he would continue the policies of Kennedy. And so, it was during JFK’s tenure that the resolution of the

Chamizal dispute started, but it was LBJ and the people that worked with him on both sides of the border that finished the resolution.

In July of 1963 U.S. Ambassador Thomas Mann and Mexican Foreign Minister Manuel Tello signed the Chamizal Convention in Mexico City. The convention then went to Washington D.C. where in January of 1964 LBJ signed it. In April, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives passed Public Law 88-300, the “Chamizal Convention Act.”

On September 25, 1964 (Chamizal Day) Presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson and Adolfo López Mateos met in the middle of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez to officially approve the Chamizal Convention of 1964. Large portions of the cities shut down to celebrate the end of the border dispute and to catch a glimpse of the two world leaders. Schools were let out and government offices and businesses were closed. Two hundred and fifty thousand people turned out to see, meet, and greet the presidents, the largest crowd in the history of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez. Perhaps one of the finest moments in the history of Mexico-United States relations was when the two presidents met in the middle of the international bridge. They walked up to each other and shook hands—a common symbol of peace, friendship, and goodwill. At this moment, the Chamizal Convention of 1964 became a reality, and the Chamizal dispute was resolved after 100 years of conflict.

The Chamizal Convention of 1964 enabled a number of things to happen. First and foremost, the convention gave the Chamizal tract back to Mexico. The land that Mexico was awarded by law in the Arbitration of 1911 but that the U.S. settled anyway was finally going back to Mexico. The 5,600 U.S. residents living on the Chamizal tract had to relocate (for more on this, read the essay entitled “Chamizal Residents”). Second, the Rio Grande was cemented through the El Paso-



Presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson and Adolfo López Mateos of Mexico shake hands on the middle of the international bridge between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, September 25, 1964.

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*Dozens of wars have been fought and thousands of lives lost due to border disputes between two countries, but the Chamizal Convention of 1964 is significant in that it settled a century-long border dispute through peaceful negotiation and diplomacy.*

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Ciudad Juarez area so that the international border would be well defined and permanently unchanging.

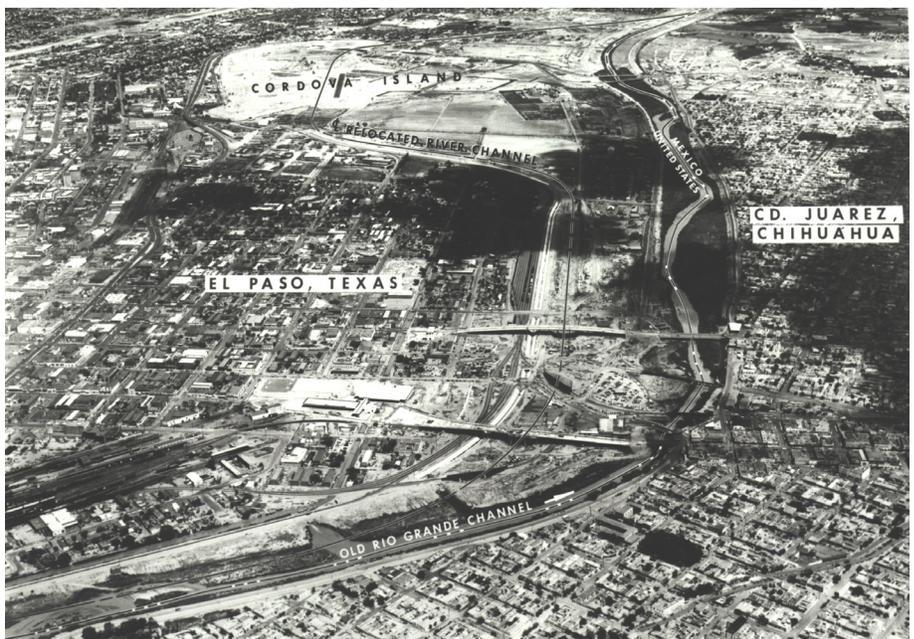
Third, weird Cordova Island became less weird. Both countries agreed that it was a little bit odd to have a Mexican tract of land surrounded on three sides by the U.S. The convention cut Cordova Island so that the new cemented channel of the Rio Grande would go through the upper half. In doing this, Mexico gave to the U.S. roughly 200 acres of the northern portion of the island. To compensate for Mexico losing 200 acres of Cordova Island, Mexico was given 200 acres downriver. Cordova Island had been a hotbed of drug traffic, illegal immigration, alcohol, and violence, but now it had a well defined border—the cemented Rio Grande—which meant better control and stability.

Fourth, the Chamizal Convention of 1964 improved the relationship between the United States and Mexico. Dozens of wars have been fought and thousands of lives lost due to border disputes between two countries (Alsace-Lorraine, Israel-Palestine, Ethiopia-Somalia, and Russia-Georgia to name a few), but

the Chamizal Convention of 1964 is significant in that it settled a century-long border dispute through peaceful negotiation and diplomacy. The fact that these two countries, who often see things differently, were able to see eye-to-eye on the issues of the Chamizal dispute, after so long, is unique.

Finally, the Chamizal Convention of 1964 called for the creation and establishment of a “peace park” in order to celebrate goodwill, understanding, diplomacy, and cooperation between the United States of America and the United States of Mexico. This “peace park” came under the administration of the National Park Service and was established as Chamizal National Memorial. Today, Chamizal National Memorial acts a cultural center, celebrating the culture, history, and heritage of the U.S.-Mexico Borderland.

When these two nations solved their differences through peaceful diplomacy, they set an example for the rest of the world to follow. Let’s promote diplomacy, peace, friendship, and understanding throughout the world for tomorrow by promoting these ideas today.



El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua (Mexico). Note: the Relocated River Channel indicates the International Border established by the Chamizal Convention of 1964

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